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THE MIS-RULE OF THREE

by

FLORENCE WARDEN

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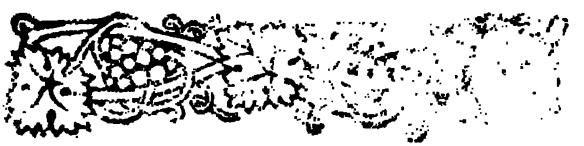

By

FLORENCE WARDEN

Author of

"[illegible] on the March," "Adela's [illegible]," "Joan the Curate," "Sensational Case," Etc., Etc.

With Eight Illustrations by

CAROLINE [illegible]

NEW YORK

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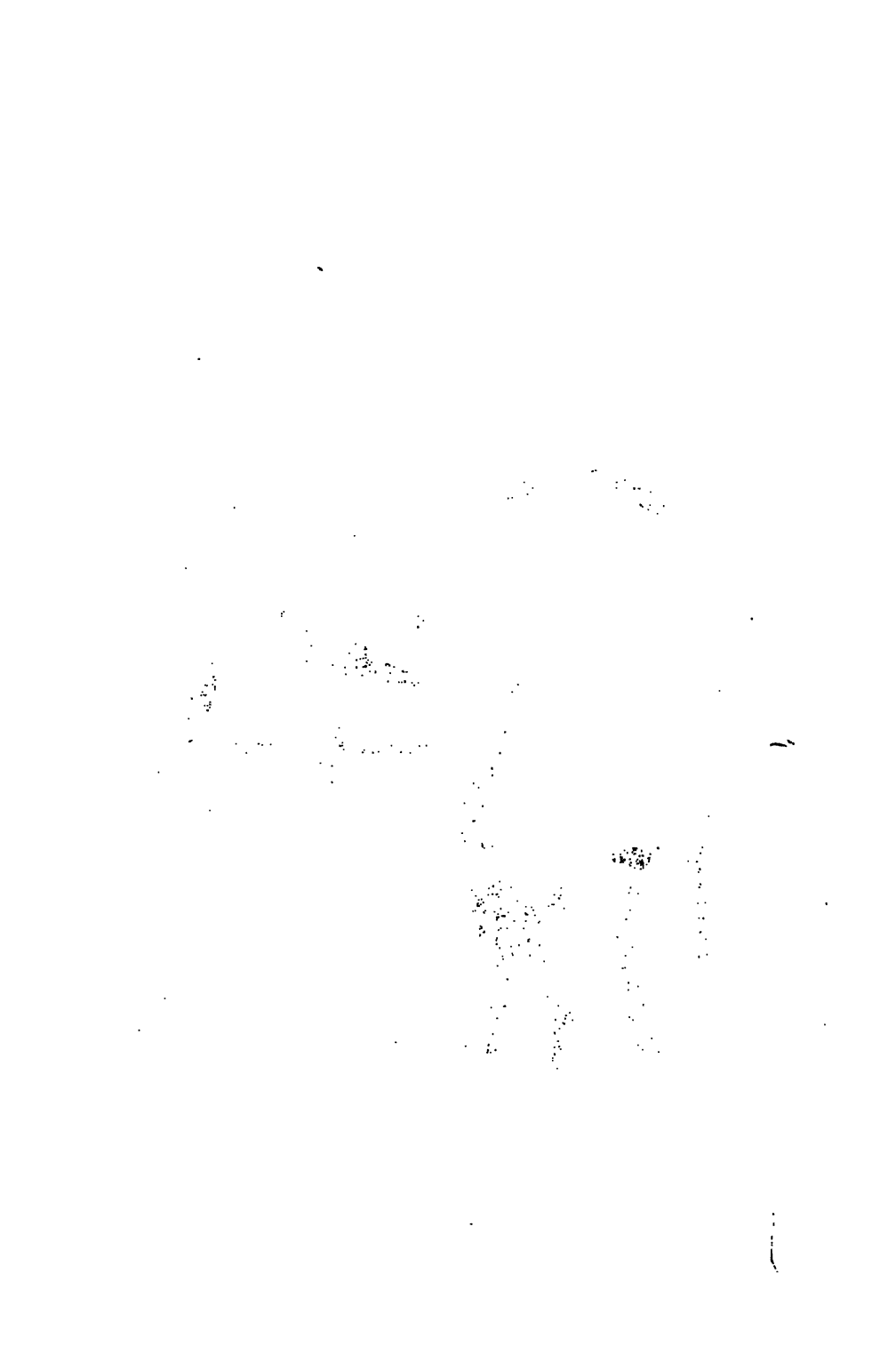

THE MIS-RULE OF THREE

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With Eight Illustrations by
CAROLINE FULGHUM

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The Mis-rule of Three

CHAPTER I

THEY DISCUSS THE GIRL

THE Diggings were in a street somewhere off Tottenham Court Road, in a tall, old-fashioned, roomy house which had seen its best days, but which still made a valiant attempt to hold its own in the respectable class in a neighborhood where respectability is not exactly rampant.

For dingy foreigners of the undesirable class abound exceedingly in those parts, and undesirables of home growth are not unknown there. Indeed, individuals of both these types did get in, now and then, within the hospitable shelter of No. 46 itself, in spite of the anxiety of Mrs. Inkersole, the landlady, to preserve the high tone of the house.

But, whoever might occupy the ground floor and the first floor of No. 46, whoever might enjoy the solid mahogany and second-hand chenille curtains of the former, or bask in the luxury of alleged Sheraton upholstered in vivid plush and brocade in the latter, the historical Diggings on the second floor remained for month after

month in the possession of the famous Three, who were known among the landlady's family and servants as "The gentlemen."

Not only did "the gentlemen" occupy the two rooms which constituted the second floor, but they overflowed upwards into two of the small apartments of the rabbit warren which is always to be found on the upper floors of the typical London lodging-house. One of these small upper rooms belonged to Bartlett Bayre, a tall, thin, dark-skinned, black-haired young man, who was a clerk at Somerset House in the first place, and a struggling writer of loftiest ambition, but as yet very indifferent success, in the second. His room was remarkable for great outward neatness, though the internal condition of the wardrobe and chest of drawers left much to be desired in the way of order.

The little room next to Bayre's was occupied by Ted Southerley, a big, broad, stolid, red-faced Northerner, who was "on" two or three papers of no world-wide circulation and with no very certain prospects, and on one which actually paid its way and afforded a modest pittance to its most energetic if, perhaps, slightly commonplace contributor.

The third member of the confraternity was a painter, to whom neither the Academy nor the New Gallery had as yet opened its doors. As the happy possessor of a small allowance from home, which enabled him to enjoy the luxury of being idle and the further luxury of pretending to be very busy at the same time, Jan Repton occupied

the place of honor among the three friends: that is to say, he had the back room on the second floor all to himself as combined studio and bedroom. This apartment, therefore, offered a picturesque combination; an easel being placed near the window for the benefit of the north light, while a small bedstead stood in one corner, and a platform for a model occupied the place of honor in the middle of the room. The bedstead was used by the day for books, newspapers and parcels of various kinds. The dressing-table made a convenient hat and coat stand; while the washstand was rendered picturesque with a display of palettes, canvases, paint-brushes, and all the paraphernalia of the artist's profession.

On occasions of state, when friends or cousins from the country were to be entertained, such choice bits of this outfit as seemed adapted to the purposes of the picturesque were transferred to the sitting-room in the front, together with the easel containing the picture upon which Repton was engaged, the model platform and a few bits of cheap brocade, remnants bought at drapers' sales, to be thrown at random across the well-worn and springless sofa and over the backs of the lodging-house chairs. Also, on these occasions, the solid square table, which would then have been particularly useful, was thrust into the bedroom at the back, so that the visitors might have their tea uncomfortably in corners, on their own laps, in what was felt to be the orthodox studio fashion.

Bayre grumbled on these occasions, objecting to

this "faking up" of an unreal atmosphere of artistic luxury to which they were unaccustomed. Ted Southerley growled more openly at the unnecessary discomfort the plan entailed. But Jan Repton was inexorable. Art was superior to all things else: and the artistic atmosphere, according to him, "gave a tone," which he was not going to sacrifice for any utilitarian whims of "you two fellows."

It may be mentioned that "Jan" was an assumed name and not Repton's real baptismal prænomen. He had, in fact, been christened plain "John"; but finding the appellation unsatisfying, he replaced it by the three simple letters which gave him at once a distinction in his small circle, which the circle did not hesitate to inform him was the only one he would ever possess.

It was after an entertainment which had not been altogether satisfactory, Repton having tried to sing and Bayre to play the banjo, both with more exuberant applause than real success, that they were rearranging the furniture in its everyday position one November evening when a certain discontent which had of late been growing in Bayre's breast reached a momentous crisis.

"I tell you what it is, Repton," said he, as he managed, after fearful struggles, to get the fourth and last leg of the table through the door into the sitting-room, "all this beastly turn-out and turning everything upside down whenever your friends and relations put in an appearance here is perfectly sickening. Have friends by all means

if you like, though Southerley and I can do without denuding half the country parishes in England of their inhabitants at regular intervals to fill our room and eat our bread-and-butter."

"Bother your bread-and-butter!" said Repton, cheerfully, as he tilted the table over into its place in the middle of the room, and dragged on the dark green tapestry tablecloth with which it was a point of honor to cover the much-dented sham mahogany top. "You could have your own relations here if you liked, or if you've got any. I'm not going to let myself grow into a moping misanthrope for you, or for Southerley either, and so I tell you."

"Nobody wants you to grow into a moping misanthrope, or into anything else you don't like," boomed out burly Ted Southerley from the cosy if slightly battered armchair by the fire into which he had dropped with his pipe when the ladies went away. "But I do think, Repton, for all our sakes, you might exercise the principle of judicious selection among your acquaintances, and especially you might introduce a little more variety among the ladies. Your female cousins are thoroughly charming, I admit, but they do run a little to the same type now, don't they?"

"You have to take your cousins as you can get them," replied Repton, cheerfully. "Some of us would be glad enough to have cousins at all; and if they were such beauties that they were run after by half London, why, you couldn't expect them to come up to take tea with us on a second floor now, could you?"

"I shouldn't expect it," snapped Bayre. "And more than that, if I have to expect it now it's not because I like it. To have to sit for two hours listening to a sandy-haired girl who can talk about nothing but the theatres and the opera, and who is trying all the time to impress you with the idea that she belongs to a circle in society where she certainly never set foot herself, and about which you yourself know little and care less, is no end of a bore."

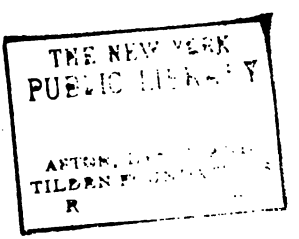
"She moves in a circle a precious sight better than yours!" retorted Repton, nettled. "And as for talking, she was only trying to find something to say because you were too surly to open your own mouth. And as for her being sandy—"

"I thought you didn't like women to be intellectual, Bayre," put in Southerley, anxious to prevent a quarrel. "I can't make out what it is you want."

Bayre, thus challenged, sat on the edge of the table, put his hand in his pocket, swung his leg, and laid down the law upon the subject of the Eternal Feminine thus:

"I like a woman," said he, "who exhales femininity at every pore. That is to say, one who is above all things modest and even somewhat shy; one who says little, does not trouble her head about the arts or sciences, or about intellectual pursuits, when compared with the interests of the home. There I imagine her supreme; calm, serene, orderly, diffusing a spirit of comfort, an atmosphere of peace, wherever she appears. She has no thought of "Society" in the modern slang

I THINK IT'S ALL JOLLY ROT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sense, because for her Society is concentrated in her home, in the little circle of human beings who depend upon her, as they would upon an all-wise, all-providing, all-healing fairy, for help and sympathy and sunny kindness."

"What you want is a housekeeper who will darn your socks, cook your mutton chop, and give her whole mind, what she has of it, to making you comfortable," said Repton, scoffingly.

"Not altogether that, though socks are more comfortable when darned than when in holes, as we occasionally wear them at present, and chops are undoubtedly better cooked than raw," replied Bayre, suavely.

"What do you think of his precious feminine ideal, Southerley?" asked Repton, with a superb raising of his light eyebrows.

"I think it's all jolly rot," said Ted, promptly. "I don't mean I disapprove of a woman's being domestic in her tastes—somebody must look after the house, and see to the dinner and all that sort of thing, I suppose; and certainly none of those things would get done very well if they were left to me—but a woman who had her hands always in dough or in dusters, whose mind was divided between her saucepan and her cotton reels, would drive me mad."

"Do *you* want small talk and Society slip-slop, then, as accomplishments?" sneered Bayre.

"No," said Southerley. "What I admire in a woman is spirit and fire, life and animation. My ideal is a girl who can ride like the wind, whose feet dance as she walks, whose eyes are all aglow

with life and vitality, and there—I shouldn't mind if she were a bit of a genius into the bargain."

"A genius!" roared Repton, derisively. "What should a female genius want with you, Southerley?"

"Well, he's welcome to her!" put in Bayre with contempt. "It's the first time I ever heard a sane man say he admired that sort of thing in a woman! And I should think it would be the last! Intellect in a woman—intellect out of the common, I mean: of course I don't mean that I admire a born fool—is an evil fungus, hideous and useless if not actually noxious in itself, and fatal, too, to the object upon which it has made its home."

"Very poetical, but very absurd," remarked Southerley. "The female genius you sneer at so loftily would be much more likely even to manage the house well than the sheep-woman you think so much of. And if she didn't, at any rate she wouldn't bore you to death as the other would."

"Why don't you get hold of some of your sheep and bring 'em here and let's see if we can worship 'em too?" suggested Repton, derisively. "They're common enough; surely you must have a few sisters and cousins and aunts who answer to the description!"

"No," said Bayre, stolidly. "It happens that I haven't. I have only one relation in the world that I know anything about, and that's not much."

"And who's he—or she?"

"*He* is an elder brother of my late father's, a very rich man who lives a kind of hermit's life on one of the smaller of the Channel Islands. A bachelor and reputed to be a miser."

"A bachelor! And very rich! Why don't you go and look him up?" said Southerley, the matter-of-fact.

"Don't know that he wants me. If he does, he's kept the fact very much to himself," said Bayre.

"If I had a rich bachelor uncle," said Repton, lightly, "I should go and get him to leave me all his money, and then find a handy cliff—"

"It would be better, first of all," said Southerley, gravely, " to find out just what 'very rich' means. It would be a pity to go and burden one's soul with a crime under a decent figure. Old gentlemen who live shut up often get the reputation of great wealth on something under two hundred a year!"

"That's a point worth considering," admitted Bayre.

"Look here, you fellows," said Repton, who had grown suddenly thoughtful, "wouldn't it be a lark if we were all of us to go to the place—wherever it is—Jersey and Guernsey isn't it? Or is it the Scillies?—and hunt up this recluse? If he didn't take a fancy to Bayre—and I see heaps of reasons why he shouldn't—why, he might to you or me, you know, Southerley? And anyhow it would be a bit of a spree, and I could find something to paint. Perhaps get known as the Jersey man, or the Guernsey man, or the Sark man, and make it impossible for anybody to think about any of those places forever after without thinking of Jan Repton."

"And I," said Southerley, "might get some decent 'copy' out of them, I fancy. Shirts for

sailors at Jersey and Guernsey; cows at Alderney; rocks, I suppose, at Sark. All interesting things that people are dying to know all about. This is to be thought of, Bayre."

"What on earth you want to go to any place for in order to write about it I don't know," observed Bayre, grimly. "For no matter what you see or what you hear, you always manage to report it under such a veneer of commonplace that nobody would ever think you got your information out of anything more up-to-date than the ninth edition of the *Encyclopædia Britannica!*"

"My dear fellow, when you write for commonplace people you must write in a commonplace way. Now you, who write for the people that read your works—people so uncommon that they don't exist—can ransack the dictionary for obsolete adjectives and introduce compound words that nobody has ever heard of with impunity."

"I may not find it easy to get to my public," said Bayre, in whose dark face a flush was rising, "but when I do it won't consist of the sweepings of the counter and the stable, or of the representatives of the culture created by Snick-snacks."

"Look here," broke in Repton, who perceived that the atmosphere was growing rather sultry, "without any chaff, don't you think a week's outing might be got out of this idea? It's the right time of year, in the first place, to see the islands in their everyday aspect, with no taint of the tourist about them."

"And the right time of year for an awfully

rough sea passage!" observed Southerley, who was not a "good sailor."

Bayre played with his moustache and reflected.

"When you come to think of it," said he at last, "it's not such a bad notion of yours, Repton, that we should go and pay the old gentleman a surprise visit. I've never been to the Channel Islands, and a blow across the sea would get rid of some of the cobwebs of this infernal city."

"Don't abuse old London, I beg," said Southerley. "It's the only place worth living in for a man with any brains in his head."

Repton and Bayre both turned on him looks of scorn. The fact that he had been in a small and modest way, successful in those callings of Art and Literature in which they themselves had so far failed—for Southerley had had his sketches reproduced in the not over-particular columns of a Sunday paper—rankled in the breasts of both.

"It happens," said Bayre, "that I could get a holiday now if I liked, and I might not be able to do so later. If you fellows agree to go I'll make arrangements as soon as you like. I've been getting restless lately. Working with no result is not good enough: dull routine work for one's bread-and-butter and nothing more's not good enough: this beastly old city's not good enough: *life's* not good enough!"

With which drastic comment on things in general and his own affairs in particular, Bayre began to swing up and down the room at a great rate, with his hands in his pockets and his dark eyes gleaming rather savagely from out of his pale face, to

which dark hair worn long gave a certain individuality at which Southerley, with his close-cropped, conventional head, and Repton, with what his friends called his sandy stubble, scoffed long and loudly.

Though neither of the other young men chafed as much under the conditions of existence as Bayre did, the suggestion of a change, of a possibly romantic adventure with a sort of object, seized both of them.

And the end of it was that, without wasting much time in discussion, they all made arrangements for a journey together to the Channel Islands, to hunt out in company this mysterious rich bachelor uncle of Bayre's in whose existence, perhaps, two of the party scarcely believed at all.

CHAPTER II

THEY FIND THE GIRL

It was on a Saturday, at 9.15 in the evening, that the three travellers started from Paddington on their search for adventures and Bayre's rich uncle.

It was very cold, and there was an ill-concealed sentiment abroad that they had chosen a time of year for their expedition which, though distinctly favorable to their chances of having the train, the boat and the islands a good deal to themselves, was not so well chosen as regarded their own comfort and enjoyment.

It was chilly work, as Repton observed, turning out of the train at Weymouth between two and three o'clock in the morning; and when they arrived at Guernsey, after a long and rough sea passage, in the gloom of a November morning, all three travellers were inclined to think that the mildness of the climate had been exaggerated, and to wonder what on earth they had left dear, dirty, dark London for at such an unseasonable time.

They had heard, through some acquaintance, before leaving town, of a quiet little lodging-house kept by a Frenchwoman, where they had made up their minds to stay, in pursuance of their determination to follow the usual tourist plans as little as possible.

Their decision involved a rather long walk through streets which looked, in the circumstances, gloomy, grimy and mean; and when at last they arrived at Madame Nicolas' modest establishment, not having taken the precaution to write and inform her of their coming, they found the place in a decidedly out-of-season condition.

However, Madame, a brisk, black-eyed little woman, and her one servant, a raw-boned, good-humored country girl in short skirt, jacket tied in by a long apron, and round close cap, were hospitable and even enthusiastic, and within half an hour the travellers were sitting down, in a prim, bare-looking *salle-à-manger*, to a breakfast of rolls, hot coffee and eggs.

Battered and disorganized by their journey, the three friends passed a lazy day, not straying beyond the limits of the town. They had already, in some measure, lost sight of the avowed object of their journey when Bayre, sitting back comfortably in a chair by the fire while Aurélie was clearing the table after their six-o'clock dinner, asked the girl, in French, if she knew anything about the little island of Creux a few miles away.

Repton and Southerley looked at their companion with eyes full of envy and disgust. Repton had picked up a few words of passable French in the course of summer excursions to Boulogne and other not unknown resorts of the Londoner. Southerley could read French books, but had the proper contempt of a University man for niceties of foreign pronunciation, so that when he conversed in any language but his own he was for the most part

unappreciated. Bayre, on the other hand, had condescended to master the French idiom, and had thereby laid himself open to the suspicion of having a terrible past.

What could the ordinary virtuous Englishman want with a thorough command of any tongue but his own? So reasoned his two less-accomplished companions, as, with jealousy in their hearts and scorn on their lips, they watched and listened, and understood a little of what he said but not much of what the voluble Aurélie replied in her Guernsey *patois*.

Oh, yes, Aurélie knew Creux very well; she had been there more than once herself, but ah! people did not care to go much to Creux since the strange things that had happened there of late, things that made people fancy all was not right on that desolate island. She for one would be very sorry to have to live there, and to lie for nearly a month after she was dead above the ground without a holy word said by priest or pastor.

And Aurélie, who showed by her excitement that she was referring to some event that had recently agitated the neighborhood, put down her plates, planted her large hands on her hips, and nodded her head with much meaning.

"Why, is it so far away as all that? I thought it was only three or four miles from Guernsey and that communication was constant," said Bayre.

"Yes, it is not further than that, and when the sea is smooth and the wind light one sails across easily enough. But in stormy weather, like that we had a few months ago, ah! then it is different.

It's all very well when the boat is out in the middle of the channel, if it is guided by a man who understands the currents and the way the wind comes through between the islands. But the shore of Creux is as steep as a wall, and one can neither embark nor land there in bad weather. And that's how it was that Mees Ford, the cross-grained old cousin who was housekeeper so long to the rich Englishman"—at this point Repton and Southerley strained their attention to the utmost, for they knew that they had got upon the track of Bayre's uncle already—"had to lie unburied for so long, and that's how it was that the coffin, with her dead body in it, was washed away at the very moment when it was being lowered into the boat which was to bring it across for burial in our cemetery here."

Aurélie shuddered at the gruesome story, of which Bayre alone understood the whole, although his two friends gathered enough of it to insist upon the repetition of the tale in such English as the girl could command.

"And when did all this happen?" asked Southerley, who had the reporter's liking for details.

"One, two, three, four, five, six montz ago," replied Aurélie, helping out his presumably weak intellect by illustration on her fingers. "Ze weazer was stormy, and ze sea like mountains—so high. It was like zat for near four week."

"It must be jolly lonely over there," remarked Repton.

"And was the rich Englishman drowned when the accident happened?" asked Southerley.

"Monsieur Bayre? Oh, no. He save himself, zough he cannot save ze boat from turning over. It was found turned upside down later," said the girl; "but ze coffin, no, zat was not found."

"Did you ever hear of this cousin of your uncle's, Bayre?" said Southerley, who thought the story an odd one, and thought also that the imagination of the islanders might perhaps have been at work upon it.

"I knew he had a housekeeper who was some relation," answered Bayre.

"Yes, yes, cousin," interrupted Aurélie, vivaciously, nodding her head two or three times to emphasize her words to the two less-accomplished Englishmen. "She and Monsieur Bayre zey was so much like one anozer, ze same long face like wood, long chin, straight mouz, small eyes zat looked out of ze corners—so!"

"You know him, then? You knew them both?" said Bayre.

"I have seen zem, but not often. Monsieur Bayre, wiz his hard face, and his dress, not like a gentleman's, but like a fisherman's, wiz his jersey, his sea-boots, his cap wiz a peak—I have seen him in his boat. Mees Ford I have also seen, when I go to Creux, walking in se cour of ze house, what you call ze yard. But zey do not come here often. Old Pierre Vazon, and his daughter, Marie—zey fetch ze sings from St. Luke's for ze *château*."

"*Château*, eh?" said Southerley.

"Oh, that's what any house that's not a cottage is called," explained Bayre. "It doesn't

necessarily mean a mansion. Have you seen Mr. Bayre much lately, Aurélie?"

"Not so much since he married his young wife—" began the girl.

But the exclamations of the three young men checked her and made her look round at them.

"Ah! You know him, perhaps, yourselves?" said she quickly, with a sort of guilty look.

After a moment's breathless pause they all began to ask her questions at once, and while she hesitated, confused, as to what sort of replies she should make, the door opened quickly and Madame Nicolas, whose attention had perhaps been attracted by the noise they all made by crying out at the same time, came in and looked angrily at the servant.

Whether she merely considered that Aurélie was wasting her time, or whether she was anxious to discourage gossip about her neighbors, it was impossible to say. But certain it is that Madame did not leave the room until the maid had gathered up the last vestige of the meal, and that the young men heard her speak in tones of reproof to the girl when the door was closed.

Bayre looked at his companions and laughed.

"Well, Repton, what do you say to that?" said he. "Where are my chances of insinuating myself into the position of heir now?"

"Things begin to look dicky, certainly," assented Repton, with a mournful shake of the head. "But it's all your own fault. You should have come sooner."

"Wonder what the wife's like!" remarked Southerley. "Wonder where he got her from!"

"Married his kitchenmaid, probably," said Repton. "A sort of Aurélie, I shouldn't wonder, who wears an all-round cap and sabots."

"My uncle is a gentleman, not a clod-hopper," put in Bayre with warmth. "I think we may take it for granted he married a woman in his own rank of life. At least, I object to it's being taken for granted that he didn't."

"My dear fellow, keep your hair on!" said Repton. "It's quite permissible to wonder whether a man who goes about in a jersey and fisherman's overalls did or did not marry to suit his rank, or marry to suit his tastes."

The discussion threatened to grow warm, as discussions between the indiscreet Repton and the more serious Bayre often did. Southerley interposed by observing that they really had nothing to argue upon at present, and that they had better master their subject before they proceeded to disagree about it.

One source of information, however, they now found unavailable. Aurélie had evidently been frightened by her mistress into discretion, for she would answer no more questions about Monsieur Bayre, except by a significant shrug and shake of the head.

It was with a mind full of curiosity about his long-neglected uncle, therefore, that Bartlett Bayre strolled out, on the morning after their arrival in Guernsey, and made his way down to the harbor.

Southerley was there already, and Bayre saw at

once, by the look of excitement in his usually lymphatic face, that something of interest had occurred.

"What's up?" said Bayre, briefly.

"What's up?" echoed Southerley, getting off the upturned boat on which he had been sitting, and speaking in a voice of mellifluous thunder. "Why, I've had an adventure."

"Already?"

"Yes. At least, perhaps you won't call it an adventure, but I do. You see that boat out there?"

He pointed to a half-open sailing-boat, strongly made, unpretentious, that stood out at sea a little way from the harbor. It had two small masts, but the sails were down and the little craft moved gently up and down with the swell of the water. There was only one person in it, a man, who sat almost motionless in the stern, with a pipe in his mouth. Bayre followed the direction of his friend's finger with his eyes, and looked at the boat and its occupant.

"Well?" said he.

"She came ashore in that —" began Southerley.

"Who's she?"

Southerley looked at him with his face aglow.

"Well, 'she' is my ideal, and there you are in a nutshell."

"No. I'm not there in a nutshell. I don't understand," said Bayre, with stolid petulance.

"Oh, you have no imagination. I tell you there stepped ashore out of that battered old boat one of the loveliest creatures that ever walked."

Bayre looked incredulous, but his friend went on: "A queen disguised in a short stuff skirt and a plain jacket and thick boots, but a queen all the same. She skipped out of the boat like a fairy; she tripped along the harbor like a fairy. And I tell you it was all I could do not to run after her, follow her, try to get another look at her."

"Why on earth didn't you?" said Bayre contemptuously.

"Because I couldn't trust myself. I should have gone down on my knees in the mud and told her there and then that she was the pearl of women," retorted Southerley, his enthusiasm growing under the stimulus of his companion's contempt. "No, I must wait here till she comes back, and I shall wait if it's a fortnight!"

Bayre laughed as he took a scrutinizing look round.

"Is that your beauty?" asked he, as there emerged from among the old houses facing the harbor a girl of the middle height, dressed in a short skirt of coarse blue serge, and a thick jacket of pilot cloth with black horn buttons, with a little tasselled fisher-cap on her head. She moved easily and well in the thick, clumsy boots she wore; and her sparkling eyes, vivid complexion, and dark hair worn in a thick plait tied at the nape of the neck were attributes of an unmistakably pretty girl.

She had a large parcel in her arms, and she was followed by a small boy of the fisher class, who was staggering under half a dozen packages of goodly size.

On she came along the pier, picking her way with easy grace of movement among litter of ship's lumber and cordage. It was the grace of over-brimming vitality, of youth and the joy of life. Against his will Bayre, too, found her fair.

"Didn't I tell you?" said Southerley, enthusiastically, below his breath.

"She's good-looking, of course," admitted Bayre, grudgingly, "but it's not my type."

However this might be, he watched her as she came along, though with no such adoration as appeared in his companion's eyes. With the ingratitude of her sex, however, it was at Bayre and not at Southerley that the girl glanced twice as she passed. And even when she had stopped near the landing-stage and taken her parcels from the boy she threw a third sidelong look at Bayre, a look which showed that for some reason he inspired her with at least a passing interest. Taking out her handkerchief, she waved it to the man in the boat, who took up his oars instead of hoisting a sail, and began slowly to return to the pier.

Once again the girl turned, glanced at Bayre, looked down at her parcels, and seemed to hesitate. Southerley made a step forward, only too anxious for an excuse to offer his assistance to the young beauty. But it was to Bayre she turned, as, apparently taking the offer of the one as the offer of them both, she said, in a bright girl's voice, speaking in excellent English but with a slight French accent that was piquant and pretty,—

"Oh, thank you so much! If you would say,

when the boat comes to the side, that I've forgotten something and shall be back directly?"

Bayre murmured his readiness, while Southerley expressed his vociferously. And with a smile and a pretty word of thanks she ran back over the ropes and the spars, the barrels and the fishing-nets, in the direction of the shops.

Southerley was put out that it should have been his companion who received the beauty's commission. Bayre laughed at him and went to the side of the pier to watch the approaching boat.

It was now near enough for him to discern the face of the hard-featured, elderly man who pulled the oars; and as he looked, as he marked the long, straight chin, the straight upper lip, and the rather long grey hair which showed under the man's peaked cap, he recognized a certain likeness to his own family, and more especially to his late father, which convinced him that he was in the presence of his uncle, Bartlett Bayre.

With a face full of interest he hung over the side of the pier, watching the boat and its rugged-looking occupant in his oilskins until the old man was only a few feet from the stone wall of the pier.

Then, leaning over, he hailed him with a smile.

"Ho! Do you know me, Uncle Bartlett?"

The man stopped on his oars, looked up quickly and stared at the young man with the watery blue eyes of age.

Bartlett Bayre was still smiling, still holding his hand out in sign of amity and goodwill. To his surprise, almost to his consternation, there came

over the older man's face, as he looked upwards, an expression of horror and alarm impossible to mistake. His weather-beaten face grew livid, and the pipe, a common clay, suddenly fell from his lips as if it had been bitten in two.

For the space of a few seconds he sat rigid, as if petrified with dismay. The next moment he had turned the boat round with one rapid movement of his right oar, and was rowing out to sea with all his might.

CHAPTER III

SOMEBODY'S IDEAL

"UNCANNY sort of man your uncle!"

Bayre started and looked round. It was Repton who was speaking; he had come up and joined his friends while Bayre was busy with the man in the boat.

"Who says it's my uncle at all?" said Bayre, sharply.

"Why, you do. You addressed him by that affectionate appellation, though I admit he was not responsive to the appeal."

Bayre stood up, angry and mortified.

"I made a mistake, of course," said he. "Being full of this unknown uncle, I was quite ready to take for him the first man who seemed to answer to the description given of him."

"Then why, if he wasn't your uncle," persisted Repton, inquisitively, "did he seem so much put out by your speaking to him? In fact, he seemed more than put out, he looked horror-struck."

"He took me for a lunatic, I suppose," said Bayre, uneasily.

"I don't see why he should. After all, even if you had been a lunatic he could scarcely be afraid of you while he was in the boat and you on the pier!"

"Of course not," put in Southerley, who had been watching and listening very attentively. "The old man's Bayre's uncle sure enough. Why, there's no mistaking the likeness between them, for one thing. He's got your long, straight, sharp chin, Bayre, and there's something indefinable besides, which I take for a family likeness. No, the fact's plain; he's your uncle, but he's in no hurry to acknowledge the relationship."

"Then," retorted Bayre, recovering his temper as he perceived a weapon for retaliation to his hand," if he's my uncle, the lady who was with him is, of course, the young wife we've heard about."

Both he and Repton burst out laughing on seeing how Southerley's face fell at the suggestion.

"Rubbish!" he said angrily. "She's a girl, not a married woman. I'll take my oath she's not more than eighteen or nineteen. Besides—besides," he began to stammer in his agitation, "she—she wore no wedding-ring!"

"Are you sure?"

"Q-q-quite sure. I—I should have noticed it. I noticed everything about her."

"Then you wasted your time," said Repton, mischievously, "for what attention she gave to either of you was distinctly given to Bayre. That points again to the man in the boat being his uncle; the lady recognized the type."

"I don't know what you can have seen to be so jolly cock-sure as to what she noticed," remarked Southerley, in a tone of displeasure, "for you were not in sight when she was on the pier."

"Not in *your* sight, because your eyes were so precious full of somebody else," retorted Repton, cheerfully. "But *you* were in sight of *me*, anyhow. I was behind that boat."

And he nodded in the direction of one of the small fishing-boats which had been hauled up on the shore close to the pier, so that the bows, protruding over the stone-work, had afforded a very good hiding-place.

"You must have had very good eyes to discern this intense admiration for Bayre in the lady!" said Southerley, growing loud in his scorn.

"Keep you hair on, Southerley," said Bayre. "He's only chaffing you. You can't suppose the lady felt any more spontaneous admiration for my charms than I did for hers. So you needn't waste good jealously upon me which might be useful some other time. She looked at me, if she looked at all, because I looked at her. And I only looked because I wondered what on earth you could find to rave about in a restless, fidgety, excitable-looking girl, who looked as if she couldn't stand still for two minutes. Depend upon it she's hysterical, and that she's the sort of girl to talk your head off; the kind of woman who would get on your nerves after the first ten minutes."

"Hysterical! She's no more hysterical than you are!" cried Southerley, in tones less subdued than ever. "You call her hysterical just because she isn't stodgy, and you prefer stodgy women, like the ass you are!"

Excited by their argument, not one of the three

young men had observed that the fair subject of their discussion had come back while it was in progress, and was now standing only a few feet away, where every word they uttered reached her ears with perfect distinctness. It was, of course, Repton, the non-talker, who caught sight of her first; and as, with a glance of horror, he seized Southerley by the arm, she tripped demurely forward, saying, as she came—

"Stodgy or hysterical, gentlemen, she will be glad if you will let her pass."

The consternation of the three culprits, especially of the two disputants, was terrible to witness. Southerley's reddish, open-air complexion became a beautiful beet-root color, while Bayre's darker skin assumed a sallow tint which was most unbecoming. At the same time they muttered confused and incoherent apologies, most pitiful to listen to; and Repton, who felt the comparative security of his own position, was the only one in a fit state to offer some intelligible words. Perhaps, however, they were not very well chosen.

"I assure you—believe me, we—that is to say they—were not talking of you, madam," he said earnestly, stimulated in his zeal for his friends by the delight of knowing that he was the only one of the three sufficiently innocent to address her. For though Southerley had indeed defended her charms, he felt that he had not done it in quite the right way, or in the subdued and refined accents befitting such a theme.

Luckily for them all, the attention of the lady,

who received all these apologies with an airy and gracious good-humor but little soothing to their vanity, was speedily distracted by her discovery that the boat with the old man in it was not waiting for her, as she had expected, at the landing-place.

She looked about her with consternation. Southerley sprang to the rescue.

"The er—er—boat— The er—er—er gentleman has gone away—is over there," said he, pointing to the speck which the two weather-beaten sails of the little boat had now become in the distance.

The young lady looked from the boat to the young men in surprise.

"Why, what have you done? Is it you who have frightened him away?" she asked.

"Not I. If it's anybody, it's—it's Bayre," said Southerley, bringing out the name with some emphasis, as he indicated his dark-faced companion.

He was prepared for the look which instantly appeared on her face as she repeated to herself the one word, "Bayre!"

And into her eyes there came a strange expression, not the horror which they had seen in the face of the old man in the boat, but a look of interest, of wonder.

Southerley, who knew how to manage a boat —on the Thames, at least—went on eagerly—

"Will you let me take you out to him? I can hire a boat here, and I know how to manage one. Ask my friends here."

But the girl smiled and shook her head. Even Bayre acknowledged to himself that she looked very handsome when she smiled, for her teeth were white and even, and the curve of her lips over them was pretty.

"I won't trouble you to do that, thank you. For that matter, I can manage a boat myself. We all learn to do that when we live on the small islands here."

All the young men noted this speech, and poor Southerley's countenance fell again. For it did look as if this beautiful creature must be old Mr. Bayre's young wife: Southerley's soul revolted at the thought. He persisted in pressing his services. If she would not trust herself with him, at least it would be something if he could show off his prowess before her admiring eyes.

"Then let me go after him," said he, "and tell him that you're waiting, tell him to come back."

She shook her head with a little hesitation.

"I can't think why he's gone," she murmured uneasily.

And then, as if involuntarily, she threw a sidelong look at Bayre.

Southerly seized the occasion of her hesitation, and hailing a boatman, who was busy with a line in a small craft on the water below, he hastily made his bargain; and dispensing, after some argument, with the services of the owner, hoisted the lug sail and started in pursuit of the man with the pipe and the peaked cap. The pretty girl in the fisher cap looked the least little bit disconcerted on perceiving that the broad-shouldered

young stranger with the red face and the deep voice was as good as his word. Instead of the admiration with which poor Southerley flattered himself that she was regarding his efforts, she watched him hoist the sail, and, with a slight frown of distress, said, in a low voice,—

"Why did he do it? He'll be drowned to a certainty! It's very dangerous to go out here without knowing something of the currents."

"Oh, he can swim," said Bayre, with indifference.

And Southerley's other friend added gallantly—

"I'm sure he wouldn't mind being drowned while he was doing you a service, mademoiselle."

"But he isn't!" said she, slowly, turning upon Repton a pair of wide-open brown eyes. "If you knew old Mr. Bayre" — and again she glanced at the young man of that name—"you'd know that it is no service to anybody to try to persuade him to do anything he doesn't want to do."

His wife, to a certainty! thought Repton, cynically.

But Bayre took a different view.

"Surely your father will come back for you?" he suggested.

The girl answered promptly—

"Oh, he's not my father—he's no relation—at least—"

And there, tantalizingly, she stopped.

For no reason in particular, certainly no reason they could have given in words, both the young men felt relieved.

"I—I beg your pardon," said Repton. "I might have known you wouldn't have a father like that."

Again the girl glanced, rather apprehensively, if rather mischievously, at the other man.

"If I'm not mistaken," said she, slowly, "he is a relation of yours."

Then she paused a moment, and seeing a sort of acknowledgment on the young man's face, she added abruptly—

"Are you his nephew?"

"I—I believe so."

She looked at him with a little inclination of the head at this confirmation of the idea she had had about him.

"I thought so," said she. "You are the son of Mr. Richard Bayre, old Mr. Bartlett Bayre's brother, and your portrait, taken when you were a little boy, standing beside your father, is at the *château* in one of the *salons*."

Bayre was at once keenly on the alert.

"Does he—do you happen to know—if my uncle ever speaks of me, madam?" he asked with vivid interest.

"Never," said she.

And she answered with a look which gave both Bayre and Repton the impression that the old man had a decidedly hostile feeling towards his almost unknown young kinsman.

The uncomfortable feeling created by this impression was strongly increased when, after a short silence, the young girl said abruptly—

"Are you going back to England soon?"

"Y-y-yes. We have to be back in London in a fortnight," said Bayre, with a blank look.

"You live in London?" A look of reflection came into her eyes. "Everybody in England seems to live in London!"

"Yes."

Then Repton, rather troubled that the beautiful girl addressed herself solely to his companion, put in,—

"You know London, of course, mademoiselle?"

There came a sudden flash of something, of eagerness, of longing, of some feeling, vivid but indescribable, into her face as she said simply,—

"I wish I did!"

"It's an awfully jolly place," went on Repton, insinuating himself jubilantly into the conversation which Bayre appeared glad to drop out of. "Lots of life, and movement, and bustle, and social enjoyment. And then there's art—divine art!" and Repton made enthusiastic circles in the air with his right hand, "and the theatres!"

"Ah!—yes!"

It was a sort of sigh that the girl uttered, not looking at him, but vaguely out at the sea with the steady yearning of eyes that see more than the physical objects before them.

Then Bayre put in,—

"London's a beastly hole, full of fog and smoke and mud, and hurrying people, and jostling ambitions that are never satisfied. As for social enjoyment, it's a fallacy. People know you there, not as yourself, but as only a tiny part of London

and its life. Real friendship, real social enjoyment, real art you get only outside."

She looked at him with interest.

"I wonder!" she said softly. Then she added, in even a lower tone, "Still, one would like to try!"

Both the young men were silent, interested, too, in the bubbling vitality that wanted some outlet, in the vague, girlish unrest that "wanted to know."

"In short, if you're to believe Bayre, London's a humbug," said Repton. "But to us artists, life and art are everywhere."

"Are you an artist?" she asked with frank interest. "With a studio, a real studio, where you work?"

Repton smiled at the manner of the question.

"I don't know about being a real artist," he said, with a sudden affectation of modesty, "but I have a real studio in Horton Street, Tottenham Court Road, where I paint pictures."

"That must be nice." And then, with that persistent interest in Bayre which seemed to his companion so offensive and unnecessary, she turned to him and said, "And are you an artist too?"

"I don't know," said he, rather blankly. "If I am, I'm an unsuccessful one. And my medium is not paint and brushes, but pen and ink."

"Oh, a writer? That's nice too!"

"It would be nicer," said he, dryly, "if the medium could be print."

"That will come! That will come! You are not very old." Then, after an instant's pause, during which she seemed to be gathering up some

lost impressions, she said suddenly, "But I must be thinking of getting back!"

"Won't you wait for—for the boat?" stammered Repton.

She had already moved a few paces away, but she paused, and said, smiling,—

"Oh, no, I can't. You will thank your friend for me. I'm sorry he should have taken that trouble." She turned away, bowing as she did so, but suddenly changed her mind and came back to them. There was a strange thoughtfulness and gravity in her face and manner as she repeated a former question,—

"And you are going back to England—London —soon? In a fortnight?"

Wondering and disconcerted, they both assented. She looked down for a moment, and then raised her head abruptly.

"Would you take a parcel to England—not for me, but to oblige one of my friends?"

"Certainly, of course we would."

"Only too delighted—"

She cut them short with a smile.

"Thank you, thank you very much. You are very kind. I shall see you again before you go away, then."

With more smiles, with more bows, she had fled away over the ropes and among the old barrels, and the two young men were left staring at each other, with the excitement of the unusual adventure still upon them.

"By Jove, what a lovely girl!" said Repton, enthusiastically.

"H'm! Lovely girl at asking questions; but we didn't get much out of her in return," said his companion, grumpily.

"Well, we couldn't sit down and put her through her catechism. It was enough for me just to be in the presence of such a handsome creature."

"Ah!" grumbled Bayre.

"But not for you, you Grimmgriffenhoof?"

"No. I don't like her."

But to judge from the way in which he looked at the boat which presently came gliding along under the pier, with two boatmen managing the sails and the pretty girl herself holding the tiller, Bayre's dislike of her was at least as absorbing an emotion as the frank adoration of his two friends.

CHAPTER IV

AND SOMEBODY'S AVERSION

THERE were "ructions" when Southerley got back to the pier, having failed to catch up the boat containing the old man, and having failed also to get a sight of the boat in which the pretty girl had set sail in her turn.

Southerley was inclined to think the conduct of his two friends unneighborly in the extreme. He felt that it was their business to have detained the lady until his return, though he could not explain how they should have set about it. He felt that he had been shamefully tricked, and he did not get over his mortification and resentment until chance threw in their way, on the following morning, a person able and willing to communicate to them those details concerning old Mr. Bayre of Creux which Aurélie had been prevented from imparting to them.

It was a tradesman's wife in the town, from whom they had bought some small nick-nacks as souvenirs of their holiday, who told them the strange story. Mr. Bayre, she said, had lived for many years a bachelor on his little island, with only his starched and penurious old housekeeper, his cousin, Mees Ford, as companion. The *château* Madame described as a magnificent and

even famous mansion, more like a museum than an ordinary house, by reason of the splendid collection of pictures, tapestries, statues and curiosities of all kinds, of which old Mr. Bayre was a well-known collector.

Even this was new to Bartlett Bayre, the younger, whose knowledge of his uncle's habits was of the slightest, and whose acquaintance with him had ceased very many years before.

The good woman went on to tell how, on one of the expeditions which old Mr. Bayre periodically made in search of more treasures, he had found an unexpected one in the shape of a beautiful young wife, whom he had brought back to Creux and shut up in the dreary *château* and the still drearier society of himself and Mees Ford.

"Poor thing!" cried Madame, raising her eyes and her hands with a shrug of sympathy, "no wonder that she was dull! This beautiful young creature buried like that in what was little better than a magnificent tomb!"

"And how long ago was this?" asked Bayre.

"A little more than two years, monsieur, since he brought her to Creux, and it is six months since she ran away."

"Ran away!"

All the young men echoed the words in different keys. It was satisfactory, at any rate, to know that the unknown beauty who had excited so much attention among them was not the ogre's wife.

"Then who is the young girl—"

The good woman put up her hand and bowed her head, as an intimation that she wished to

proceed with her tale her own way. And she again addressed Bayre,—

"She ran away, as well she might; and the only pity is that she was not allowed to take her baby with her!"

"Baby!"

"Yes, messieurs, a charming baby. She ran away with him, and reached the port here with him safely. But Marie Vazon, who had charge of the child, played her false at the last, and left the poor young mother to go alone to England without him. Oh, those Vazons! They are the spies of old Mr. Bayre; father and daughter, they have command of everything for him. And they do say that old M. Bayre and Mees Ford knew what young Madame was going to do, and that, like the selfish old people they were, they rejoiced to get rid of her. As for the baby, it is left to Marie Vazon at the farm. A pretty nurse, *ma foi!*"

And Madame raised her eyebrows with a significant look.

Again Southerley's voice broke in. All this information about wives and babies might be very exciting for Bayre, whose chances of being his uncle's heir were thus destroyed, but compared with the great subject that, of the glorious girl in the fisher cap, it was positively tedious.

"But who is the handsome girl with the long brown hair—" he began again persistently.

Madame turned to him with a smile.

"Ah! She will not be buried in the tomb-like *château* any longer," she said archly. "Mees Eden is a ward of old M. Bayre's, and she is going

to be married to a gentleman of the island—of this island, I mean."

Southerley gave a groan. But Repton drew himself up.

"Tell me his name that I may go and shoot him," he said valiantly. "The islands are all very well, but if you'll forgive my saying so, Madame, the lady is too handsome for so confined a sphere; we have already decided that she must come to England—in fact, that she must marry one of *us*."

Madame burst out laughing.

"Ah, you are not the only young gentleman to feel like that about Mees Eden," she said. "But M. Bayre he has French ideas about his ward, and he chooses to marry her to a staid, middle-aged man like himself rather than to a hot-headed young fellow about whom he could not feel so sure."

"But that bright-eyed girl would never let herself be handed over, like a parcel of currants, to a man she didn't care about—a middle-aged man too!" cried Repton.

"Ah! I cannot say, but I think it is so," said Madame. "Although Mees Eden is the daughter of an Englishman, a very old friend of M. Bayre's, her mother was a French lady, and she has been brought up at a school in France. I think she will do as French girls do; they have spirit, but they are obedient; and why should she not do as her mother did before her?"

"She must be so dull at Creux," said Southerley, thoughtfully, "that I suppose she would do anything for a change."

"How long has she been here?" asked Bayre, breaking in rather suddenly and rather imperiously upon the lighter tones of the rest.

"Only a few months. It was after his wife had run away that M. Bayre sent for her from her school. And then, while she could not get to Creux by reason of the gales and the stormy weather, his old cousin died. It was a dreadful business, for the weather was too rough for her body to be brought over for burial here, and—"

"I know," interrupted Repton. "They told us. It was washed away."

Madame nodded.

"Yes. It was a dreadful business. Old M. Bayre has never been quite the same man since. You see the one shock came close upon the other. Even if he did not care much for his wife, we must suppose her running away to have had some effect upon him. And though he and Mees Ford used to quarrel, still he had been used to her for long years, and doubtless he felt her death deeply. Now he shuts himself up more than ever, and he never goes away to London or to Paris as he used to do. And when strangers come to see his collection they never see him."

"Oh, we can see his collection, then?" said Repton, with interest.

"Oh, yes. It is his great pride to let strangers see it. Formerly he or his housekeeper would show them through the rooms, but now it is a servant who leads visitors through them."

The young men looked at each other.

"We'll go over to-morrow," said Southerley.

Bayre assented, but with a grave and preoccupied air. The whole tale was a weird one, and concerning his own family as it did, it gave him food for reflection.

When, therefore, on the following day, they engaged a couple of boatmen to take them over to Creux—for Southerley did not offer to repeat his experience of navigating the channel himself—Bayre remained moody and thoughtful in the bows while his companions were chatty and cheerful in the stern.

It was one of those bright and sunny days of which January generally gives us a few as a set-off against the asperities of the February and March which must inevitably follow; the first view of the steep and rocky coast of Creux, with its fringe of jagged rocks, picturesque to see but dangerous to negotiate, was striking and impressive. The cliffs, of black and white granite, rose sheer out of the water, broken and eaten away in many places into deep ravines, where a softening growth of brown ferns made beautiful the entrance to shadowy caverns in the rock.

Outside the cliffs many a jagged pinnacle of the granite shot up its points from a little base of foam into the air, with seabirds circling round its summit and a soft plash-plash beating against its sides.

Nothing could be seen at first approach beyond the rocks and the steep cliff; but presently the travellers, struck dumb with appreciation of the picturesque, found themselves approaching a poor sort of little pier, close by which a small house,

with a man in fisherman's jersey lolling in front of it, gave the first sign of human presence on the island.

With some difficulty the boat was made fast and the three young men scrambled ashore. A climb of a few minutes brought them to the top of the cliff, and thence it was but a short quarter of a mile to the famous *château*, which, half hidden by almost the only clump of trees on the island, proved to be a long and very unimposing stone dwelling, large, straggling, and evidently built with an eye rather to use than to beauty.

On their way the travellers passed a small farmhouse, where a man of age difficult to fix, with greyish hair and clad in a blouse, saluted them and watched them with furtive eyes as they made their way towards the house. He was a very unprepossessing person, with small eyes set close together, and with the wrinkles of cunning and of avarice on his weatherbeaten face.

The unimposing entrance to the *château* was by a small courtyard, on the other side of which was a pleasant garden in which, in the summer, fruit and flowers, vegetables and sweet herbs, grew side by side.

A ring at the bell, the clang of which they heard echoing through the old house, brought to the door a woman of the peasant type, quite young, probably, and not ill-looking of feature, but with sly blue eyes and thick lips, and a furtive expression. She was dressed rather in the simple farmhouse costume than in that of the usual servants

of a country house, and wore the round, close cap which is so generally becoming.

On making known their wish to see the treasures of M. Bayre's collection, they were at once admitted by her into a plain-looking hall, where they inscribed their names in a large book which lay, with pens and ink, upon a table at one end.

While they were doing this they heard certain sounds in a little gallery above them, which informed them that they were observed from that quarter; and suddenly the girl looked up, and, as if obeying a signal, begged the gentlemen to excuse her one moment, ran up the staircase and for a moment disappeared.

When she came hurriedly down again, after an absence of a few seconds only, she was red and shy. Stammering out her excuses, she said that only two persons could be shown through the mansion at one time, and singling out Repton and Southerley, she opened a door on her left hand and showed them in, while she beckoned to the mortified Bayre to follow her to the door by which he had entered.

"Oh, come, I say! We don't want to go in unless we can all go," cried Repton, in astonishment.

But Bayre, who understood that his uncle meant to forbid him, and him alone, the house, waved his hand in token that they were to go without him, and hurried, without a word, out of the house.

He was in a tumult of irritated feeling. As he threw one glance up at the windows of the mansion which was so undeservedly closed to him, he

caught sight of the face of Miss Eden, pale and constrained, looking out. Most unreasonably he at once decided that this girl had somehow had a hand in his discomfiture, and it was with a feeling of fierce dislike—or at least he thought it was—and of defiance that he raised his hat to her and at once dashed into the avenue and disappeared from her sight.

He could not understand the effect the sight of this girl had upon him. If he had felt irritated before at his uncle's refusal to allow him to enter his house, that feeling was as nothing to the burning indignation he experienced at the thought that this bit of a girl, this restless, hysterical, fidgety girl, as he had, in his utter ignorance, called her, should have been a witness of the gross outrage which had just been put upon him.

It was in vain he told himself that he did not care what she saw or what she thought, that she was a capricious, malicious creature who had herself urged his uncle not to have anything to do with him.

He could not forget her face; he could not get over his annoyance. As he walked out from under the avenue trees into the winter sunshine he felt as if unseen eyes were upon him, as if undiscoverable throats were muttering hoarse laughter from the shelter of the brambles and the dead ferns that he passed.

But these fancies presently grew into the knowledge that he was indeed being watched, not by an unseen elfish being, but by the morose-looking man in blouse and peaked cap whom they had

passed at the farmhouse. And, discovering suddenly a likeness between this individual and the girl who had opened the door of the mansion, Bayre had no difficulty in deciding that they were father and daughter, and guessed that these were the two people of whom he had heard—the rulers of the island under his uncle, the spies, Vazon and his daughter Marie.

Bayre had an uncomfortable feeling that this man knew of the slight which had been put upon him, and that he had been told off to watch him until he should have left the island. Full of fury as this suspicion crossed his mind, the young man resolved not to linger about for his friends but to return at once to the boat and to wait for them there.

He was, however, drawn aside by the beauty of a singular natural curiosity which came in his way when he drew near the coast, one of those strange, funnel-like openings down through the cliffs to the sea which are such a feature of these islands. Peering down the wide opening through the green growth and dead bracken which formed a graceful fringe around the opening, Bayre was fascinated by the long dark vista, and by the sight and the sound of the incoming tide dashing little waves of feathery foam against the funnel's sides.

As he looked, holding his pipe in one hand and his pouch in the other, more with a wish to seem to be light-hearted than because he felt a longing to smoke, he was startled by a girl's voice behind him.

It was a soft voice, a sweet voice; there was no

... and, discovering such ... between this individual and the ... opened the door of the mansion. ... the difficulty ... ing that they were ... father and daughter, ... guessed that these were the two people of ... on the island—the rulers of the island under his uncle—the spies Vezon and his daughter Marie.

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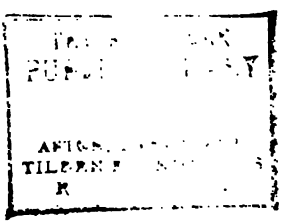
... drawn aside by the beauty ... which came in ... way ... one of those ... range, ... ough the ... to the ... re of ... islands. ... ing the green ... and dead ... ined a graceful ... around ... was ... and the ... waves of ... nd ... ...g

TURNING, BAYRE SAW MISS EDEN



getting away from that fact. Nevertheless it was the voice of the "hysterical, restless, fidgety" girl.

"Oh, Mr. Bayre, I'm so very, *very* sorry!"

And turning round so quickly that he narrowly missed precipitating himself through the funnel into the water below, Bayre saw Miss Eden, her fisher cap on her head, her jacket, hastily put on, open, and her eyes brighter, more beautiful than ever.

He tried to feel that he loathed her, but it was a hard task.

CHAPTER V

WAS IT AVERSION?

BAYRE tried to look as if he did not understand what it was that the pretty girl was sorry for. But Miss Eden made short work of his pretended ignorance by saying gently,—

"I have an idea about your uncle; it is an idea formed upon his treatment of me and it seems to be consistent with his treatment of you. Although he sent for me himself from the school where I was, and wrote me a nice letter implying that he and his cousin were lonely and that they would be glad to have me, yet now I'm here he seems to avoid me as much as he can. And now, you see, when he knows that his nephew is here—for that he recognized you as his nephew I am pretty sure from something he said—why, he avoids you too."

Bayre made an attempt at a haughty smile.

"Oh, if he thinks I mind that he won't let me see over his collection he's mistaken. And if he thinks I feel a greater interest in it than any outsider would do he is mistaken again. I've never wished to obtrude upon my uncle's seclusion; I never have obtruded upon it. And if my curiosity as a visiting tourist is at all disappointed, I am more than compensated by the satisfaction I feel

that I have always been independent of relations who seem to be devoid of the ordinary instincts of humanity."

Over Miss Eden's pretty face there came a slightly puzzled look.

"I don't say it's unnatural in the circumstances, but I think you're too hard," she said. "I'll tell you what I've always said to myself about Mr. Bayre, when he has been more than usually brusque in his manner to me. It is this: Is it fair to judge a man directly after he has experienced two great shocks? I dare say you know all about them, what happened in the case of his wife, and then in that of his cousin. Just think of it," went on the girl, warmly, her face lighting up with generous emotion, her voice deep, and low, and thrilling; "to lose them both, one after the other, within a few weeks."

"Was he quite without blame?" asked Bayre, quickly. "To judge by what I have seen of him it's not likely."

"What have you seen?" retorted Miss Eden. "Nothing. Less than nothing. He hasn't even spoken to you!"

Bayre laughed rather grimly.

"Exactly. A gentleman who shows such marked amiability to a kinsman would be the sort of person to treat others in the same way."

She shook her head slowly.

"From what I've heard," she said with conviction, "he must have been very different before those two things happened. To begin with, he was very generous. If the poor in the islands

wanted help he was always the first to give it. Now he is soured, changed, I admit; he seems stunned by his misfortunes, and he shuts himself up to brood upon them. But I believe that this mood will pass; give him another six months and I believe he will be his old self again. At least, I hope so. At present he is suffering from two blows to his affections, and he seems *afraid*, positively afraid to trust himself to love anybody else."

"Well, I'm sure I don't want him to love me," said Bayre in an off-hand tone.

"No, it doesn't matter to you, of course, because your life is spent away from him," said the girl, rather ruefully. "But it does to others, to me, and to—to others besides me."

And a still graver look passed over her face.

Bayre looked at her and softened in spite of himself.

"Of course it does," said he, almost humbly. "It must make a very great difference to you. In fact, I can't understand how you manage to exist in such utter loneliness as you describe."

The girl gave a sort of sigh, which she immediately turned into a laugh.

"Well, I don't suppose I shall have to endure it for long. In the meantime it's such a pleasant change, after the strict school-hours I've been accustomed to, to get up when I like, to read as much as I like, to walk, row, sail, bathe just when I like, that I haven't found life pall upon me one bit. Whether I should get tired of it if I had nothing else to look forward to I don't know; I

suppose I should grow restless and discontented. But at present I can't say that I'm suffering tortures on account of the touch of Robinson Crusoeism that there is in my existence."

Of course she was not. Bayre glanced at her and understood perfectly the feeling of freedom after restraint which this live, this brilliant creature, quivering with vitality, must enjoy in the easy, open-air life she described: even her reading, he thought to himself, would be done for the most part out of doors, with the fresh breeze from the sea blowing upon her young face, the salt spray helping to curl into graceful little tendrils the loose strands of brown hair which escaped from the confinement of the black ribbon at the nape of her neck.

"What do you read? Novels, I suppose?" he asked, after a moment's pause.

And the moment he had uttered the words he felt that they were an impertinence. What right had he to question her upon her habits and tastes? She blushed a little, and he had begun to stammer a kind of apology when she waved away his words and said frankly,—

"Novels! Yes. I'm afraid it is chiefly novels. But I've read Carlyle's *French Revolution*, and liked it too!" she added, with a certain rather comical pride.

"That was indeed most meritorious on your part," said Bayre, with mock gravity, feeling the oddest conflict within him between his avowed tastes and the strong and strange attraction this girl had for him.

Strange, because it was more than the ordinary admiration which a young man feels for a beautiful girl. Now that he saw more of her, he felt drawn by a sort of magnetic attraction in her sparkling eyes, something which made him inquisitive to read into the depths of that bright young soul, something that told him, much more plainly than did her words, that she was no ordinary pretty girl, but that she had a nature which could feel and a head which could think.

"Oh, I didn't mean that!" she replied, laughing again. "But when a man talks of novels there is always a suggestion in his words that they are beneath *him*, at all events."

"*I* am not in a position to say that they're beneath me," said Bayre. "I want to write them. Indeed, if the truth were told—"

"You've written one already? Well, so have I!"

"Ah!"

There was a certain inevitable tone of indulgence in this exclamation which made the girl redden.

"Why do you say 'Ah!' like that?"

"Did I say it offensively?" said Bayre, smiling at last.

"I won't go so far as to say that; but you said it in a tone which implied—well, I think it implied that you could not expect much from my performance."

"If my tone said all that I apologize humbly. And yet, no, on second thoughts I don't apologize. For after all, what could there be in a novel by a

young girl just out of school, who knows nothing whatever of life beyond the four walls of her schoolroom?"

"But one can imagine, even if one doesn't know."

There was an indescribable spirit and impulse under these words which made the young man look at her curiously.

"Yes, yes, but imagination is not of much value unless it has something to go upon. It is of no more value than a painting done by a man who had never seen anything but his paint-box. You must study Nature, copy Nature, before your imagination is of any use to you!"

"Ah! Now you go too far," cried she, warmly, "for it is of use, even if it only serves to make the world look more pleasant than it really is."

"I don't call that a use, I call it a danger," said Bayre, now quite as warm as she in his argument. "Supposing, for instance, you start by endowing with all the gifts of your imagination some commonplace person whom, upon that and that alone, you resolve to marry, would your imagination be strong enough, do you think, to enable you to gild your bargain to the end?"

She blushed a rosy red and looked at him half angrily, half mischievously, with a quick glance.

"Is a man the worse for being commonplace?" she asked. "And is it likely that I, who, as you say, know nothing of the world and the people in it, should ever be able to start on a voyage of discovery in search of the man that isn't commonplace?"

Bayre laughed. And he thought, rather guiltily, of his own avowed ideals, which were very much the same as hers. And at the same moment it flashed through his mind that these same ideals were unsatisfying in his case; it followed, therefore, that they must be proved to be so in her case also.

"Look here," said he, "I'm not going to dispute that many high qualities, or let us say many serviceable qualities, may be found in those people whom it's usual to call commonplace, people with no imagination, no ideas; but you, with your romantic tendencies—"

"How do you know I have romantic tendencies?"

Bayre answered, after a pause, that it was because she read novels and wanted to write them. But it occurred to him, even as he said this, that the real reason for his opinion was that he saw romance sparkling in her eyes, emanating from her, encircling her. She was a figure of romance in herself. Frank, sympathetic, impulsive, imaginative, brimming over with the joy of life, she was the very incarnation of healthy, joyous, budding womanhood, of the womanhood that looks out with eyes full of vague golden hope at the future, and that lives meanwhile in almost ecstatic joy in the present.

"Well," said she, with a happy smile, "surely it's rather a shrewd arrangement to use up one's romantic tendencies by reading novels, and perhaps even by writing them, so that they mayn't interfere with the prosaic course of one's actual life."

"Is actual life prosaic to you?" said Bayre. "A young girl shut up in a lonely and gloomy house with an old guardian who hardly ever speaks to her! I never heard of a less prosaic situation in my life.

"Ah, well, the prose is to come," said she, lightly. "Your uncle is very anxious to get me off his hands, and he is to introduce to me to-morrow a certain neighbor of his who, it seems, has been struck by my charms, and who proposes humbly to solicit the honor of my fair hand."

The girl said this with the most delicious mixture of mischievous amusement and girlish shyness, blushing and looking away, while at the same time her eyes danced with fun and her lips were curved into a smile. Bayre was stupefied, indignant.

He had not the least reason to be, of course.

"And you mean to say that you're going to let yourself be married off to a man you care no more for than that?" he asked quite sharply.

"I don't know whether I care for him; I've never seen him yet."

"Never—seen him!"

"At least, not to my knowledge. As he has seen me it's possible I may recognize his face when he's formally introduced to me. He lives at Guernsey, and I'm often over there."

"And do you really think any happiness could come of a marriage arranged like that?—in that cold-blooded fashion?" asked Bayre, warmly.

The girl blushed a deep red.

"My mother was a Frenchwoman," she answered simply. "And if you know anything of France you must know that there it is not

customary for girls to have so much freedom of choice as in England."

"But you're English—your father was an Englishman," said Bayre, warmly. And then a bright thought struck him: "you see I, being your guardian's nephew, may be looked upon as a sort of relation of yours—"

"Oh, no," cried Miss Eden, rippling with smiles.

"Yes, indeed," persisted Bayre, emphatically. "My uncle is nothing but an old fossil, who knows little more of the world than you do yourself. I begin to see that it's nothing less than my duty to bring my own greater knowledge and experience to bear upon this matter. In short, if your guardian won't do his duty and exercise a proper discretion on your behalf, I shall have to do it for him, and, and—"

"And choose a husband for me?" asked Miss Eden, in the most solemn and demure tone, the while her bright eyes flashed with the humor of the thing.

"Exactly," replied Bayre, as solemnly as she, while his eyes looked into hers, seeing the roguery in them and answering it with mischief in his own.

By this time both were bubbling over with suppressed laughter, enjoying intensely this huge joke of his vague relationship and assumed authority. Bayre's disappointment and irritation at his uncle's snub were both forgotten. Miss Eden had forgotten, too, that her errand in meeting the young man had been one of benevolent sympathy and consolation. They had wandered together away from the opening in the cliff and downwards

among the dead fern and brambles towards the shore. Bayre had had to help her, now and then, with a strong hand holding hers as they stepped over loose stones and thorny clumps of bush and bramble. It was pleasant, exciting, this aimless ramble in the winter sunlight, with the sea breeze blowing in their faces and the splash of the waves in their ears.

And then, suddenly, there broke upon them a sound less pleasant, because it called them back to life and prose. This was the voice of Repton calling to Bayre by name. The young man stood still and looked round. Neither Repton nor Southerley was in sight yet, but a glimpse of an old blue blouse and of a crouching back behind a clump of bushes at the top of the cliff showed that the idyllic promenade of the two young people had not been unobserved.

Miss Eden saw the blouse at the same moment, and she frowned angrily.

"There's that old spy, Pierre Vazon," cried she. "Nothing that happens here escapes the eyes of him or his daughter. They're a pair of ignorant, cunning peasants of the lowest type, and I hate them both."

"Is that his daughter who opened the door of my uncle's house to us?"

"Yes. She rules everything indoors and her father everything out."

"The man has a horrible face, and I don't like the woman's much better," said Bayre. "Does my uncle like these people?"

Miss Eden hesitated.

"I sometimes think," said she, "that—that he's afraid of them."

"Afraid! Why should he be?"

"I—don't—know." Before Bayre could ask another question the voices of his two friends, still shouting to him, were heard again from above; and the girl, whose manner had changed since the interruption, gave a glance up towards the spot where the peasant was watching, and leapt down towards the shore, away from her companion. "Your friends are calling you, Mr. Bayre. Good-bye," she said, as, with a little inclination of the head, she disappeared in the direction of one of the caverns with which the cliffs were honeycombed.

CHAPTER VI

A BOLT FROM THE BLUE

BAYRE stood for a few moments where she had left him, his mind full of a strange idea suggested by some of her latest words.

His uncle was afraid of the Vazons. Why?

That she had meant to imply something more than a mere idle fancy he knew perfectly well. This fear of the peasant and his daughter on the part of their master and employer had its origin in something stronger than mere prejudice or timidity: so much he felt sure of, so much had the girl's look and tone implied.

And involuntarily the young man's thoughts flew back to that strange story of the death of Miss Ford, and of its tragic sequel. Ugly fancies invaded his mind, connecting themselves with his uncle's strange reluctance to meet him and with these fears of his own servants of which he had just heard.

He was quite glad when the voices of Repton and Southerley, bawling his name in louder tones than before, broke in upon his unpleasant thoughts and at last elicited from him an answering cry.

In a few moments they had met and were making their way together back to the boat.

Repton and Southerley were full of regrets that

Bayre had not been with them during their visit to the house, the treasures of which they described with a voluble enthusiasm which, as they both spoke at once, and each described a different room at the same time, produced upon their companion rather a vague sense of magnificence.

"He's got one of the finest Murillos I ever saw, and an undoubted Rubens, which the National Gallery would give a fortune for," said Repton.

"Some of the tapestries and china are A1," said Southerley, talking through Repton's speech. "And he's got some old French furniture as good as any in Hertford House."

"It was an infernal shame, Bayre, that they wouldn't let you in too," said Repton. "But perhaps he thought you might be too anxious to claim the rights of kinship when you saw the treasures he'd got."

"Oh, well, I'd just as soon hear about them as see them," said Bayre, philosophically. "After all, perhaps there would have been a temptation for me to help myself to a few souvenirs of dear Nunky in the way of portable property."

His friends, having parted from him when he was in a gloomy and savage condition, were quite surprised to see how completely he had got over his disappointment. They went on condoling with him with a lighter heart.

"It was too bad that you should be condemned to a lonely stroll outside while we were rioting in luxury inside," said Southerley.

Bayre did not undeceive them. He lit his pipe,

which he had been holding unlighted in his hand, settled himself comfortably in the bow of the boat, and gave himself up to thoughts in which neither his friends nor his uncle had any share; and while the other two babbled of their visit to the mansion, and talked imperfect French to the boatmen, both of whom understood every word they said in English, the artful Bayre caught a thrilling glimpse of a white pocket-handkerchief fluttering against a background of cavernous darkness, away under the cliff behind them. Taking off his cap he waved it in the air, a proceeding which caused both Repton and Southerley to turn their heads shorewards with much suddenness.

But they saw nothing, and the rascal in the bows refused to acknowledge that he had seen anything either. A lingering mistrust of him glowed darkly in the eyes of the other two for a little while, but he kept his own counsel, and they could get nothing out of him.

It was two days after this that they all came face to face with another party of three persons in one of the streets in the upper town.

One of these persons was old Mr. Bayre, dressed as before in serge trousers and pilot coat, with a pipe between his teeth and his yachting cap drawn well over his eyes. His hands were in his pockets, and he walked along with bent head and shuffling step, and without exchanging a word with his two companions. One of these was a stout Frenchman of middle age, whose round, pink, flabby face was garnished by a huge double chin, and furthermore set off by a pair of blue glasses, which helped

with the big Panama hat he wore, to give him a strange and most unattractive appearance.

The third member of the party was pretty Miss Eden, and on her face there was such a look of subdued dismay that Bartlett Bayre jumped instantly to the conclusion that the stout gentleman in the goggles was the husband chosen for her by her guardian.

Bayre started forward, on meeting the three, with the intention of forcing his uncle into conversation. Vague ideas of remonstrance, not only with his uncle's treatment of himself but with his treatment of this girl, filled the young man's mind.

But the wily old recluse was more than a match for him. Before his nephew could traverse the dozen yards that lay between them, Bartlett Bayre, senior, had turned on his heel and disappeared down a turning, where he was able to hide himself within some friendly neighbor's door.

When Bayre, junior, came back, disappointed, from a vain pursuit, both Miss Eden and the owner of the Panama hat were out of sight.

Restless, excited, moved out of himself by emotions he could scarcely analyze, Bayre was irritated beyond endurance by the talk of his two friends, who had both conceived the same opinion, that the stout gentleman in the goggles must be the pretty girl's intended husband.

"It's outrageous, preposterous, impossible!" Repton was bawling, with the light-hearted enthusiasm of an irresponsible person, as Bayre came up. "Of course, such a thing is not to be endured.

What! Marry that lovely girl with the creamy skin to an old effigy with a great pink roll at the back of his neck! A wholly hideous and unpaintable person! Perish the thought!"

"She must be rescued, undoubtedly," assented Southerley. "The only question is how to set about it?"

"Oh, there's one other thing—*Who's* to set about it?" said Repton, firmly. "Shall it be you or I?"

"Or shall we let her have her choice, eh, Repton? I don't mind doing that, because I feel sure she'll choose me. No girl with those eyes would look twice at a fellow with sandy hair."

"Perhaps she won't care for a red face either," retorted the artist, calmly. "Bayre, what do you say to entering the lists? Some girls like a sallow face and lank hair without any gloss on it."

"Some people don't like a pair of tom-fools, replied Bayre, savagely. "What does it matter to you whom Miss Eden marries? Mind your own business and don't bawl people's names out so that everyone for a mile round can hear the stuff you're talking."

"Keep your hair on, my dear friend," said Repton, with annoying calmness. "If Miss Eden's nothing to us, she's nothing to you either, you know. Even if you were serious about her it's not likely your uncle would entertain you for a suitor when he won't even allow you inside his doors."

Bayre turned livid, but said nothing. He did not, indeed, trust himself to speak.

But that very afternoon, stealing out of the

house quietly, while his friends were smoking in the little *salon*, he hired a boat and set sail for the island of Creux.

He meant to see Miss Eden, if he died for it. Perhaps some rags of pretence still hung about his mind as to the reason of the interest he took in the beautiful girl. But if so, they fell away and left the bare truth for him to face when, coming upon the girl suddenly in a cleft of the cliff as he went upwards on landing, he found that the unexpected meeting sent the blood flying to his head with a force which made him giddy.

For a moment he said nothing, and, strange to say, the girl was silent also.

"Well?" said she at last.

She was changed since he had seen her last. The color had left her cheeks, and though her eyes were as bright as ever it was with a different brightness: they seemed to glitter, so he fancied, with unshed tears. And she had not even the conventional smile of greeting for him, but let the one word drop from her lips in a rather husky and tremulous voice, almost, so he thought, as if she felt sure that he guessed the reason of her sadness.

"I—I wanted to see you again," stammered he at last. "I came—I came—to—to see you."

He was ashamed of himself. Anything more lame, more clumsy, than these words it was impossible to imagine. But Miss Eden took them quite simply.

"Why did you want to see me?" she asked quickly.

"I—I couldn't speak to you this morning. And

I thought perhaps—perhaps you would think it odd."

He was floundering hopelessly. Why should she think it odd? he asked himself with rage at his own lack of words, of ideas. But again she lifted him out of his embarrassment by saying,—

"I thought you wanted to speak to your uncle, not to me."

"I wanted to, but I missed him; or rather, he ran away from me."

"Ah!"

Their eyes met. And he saw that she, as well as he, thought this shyness on the part of the old recluse mysterious and suspicious.

"Why should he avoid me?"

The girl shook her head.

"Why does he avoid everybody?" she said.

The words raised Bayre's uneasiness to fever pitch.

"I don't like to think of your being here all by yourself with those two wretched peasants and an indifferent guardian," he began impetuously.

He had almost said "a guilty guardian," but had fortunately checked himself in time.

"Oh, well, I sha'n't be here long," she answered and her face became more sombre as she spoke.

"That man—who was with you yesterday. Surely he—he was not—is not—" stammered Bayre, reddening as he put the mutilated fragment of a question.

She nodded gloomily.

"Yes," she said, looking away from him and shivering slightly. "That is Monsieur Blaise, whom my guardian has chosen as my husband."

"But you will never marry him—you?"

She frowned petulantly.

"Oh, how can I tell? I suppose so," she said.

"You will be miserable!"

"Shall I? I don't know. Can anybody ever tell those things? No doubt he is a good man, and my guardian is anxious, very anxious, for my marriage."

"Why?"

"Oh, I don't know. To get rid of me, I suppose!"

"I can't understand you," broke out Bayre, almost passionately. "You seem a girl of spirit, of resource, yet you can calmly submit to be disposed of, by a guardian who doesn't care for you, to a man whom you don't care for—"

"How do you know that?"

She turned upon him with a pretty flash of defiance.

But he waved aside the suggested protest.

"As if you could!" said he, not guessing how absurdly eager and anxious he was showing himself in this business which was none of his.

Miss Eden twisted her pretty mouth into a little grimace.

"He's not exactly the ideal of one's dreams, perhaps!" she said under her breath.

Whereat Bayre, grown bolder, laughed outright.

"You won't do it?" he said, becoming suddenly grave.

But she would not give him a direct answer.

"There are many things to be considered," was her vague reply.

He stood before her, pulling the long ends of his ragged moustache, fighting with a hundred impulses, not one of which had any sort of reason or logic to recommend it. He was interested in this girl, preposterously interested, considering how far removed she was from the type which he had always supposed himself to admire the most. If he had been well off, if even he had been anything but the struggling poor devil of a beginner at life that he was, he knew that he should have cast discretion, common sense to the winds, and that he should have asked her to marry him—him, Bartlett Bayre, hater of spirited woman, and worshipper at the shrine of placid, purring womanhood without a word to say for itself.

As it was, however, that madness was not possible to him. He could not offer to take a girl reared in luxury, as he presumed she was, to share a London garret with him. But the wish, the impulse that prompted this mad thought shone in his eyes, and probably communicated itself to Miss Eden, who blushed when she looked at him, and gave a glance round, preparatory to running away.

"So you've come by yourself to-day," she remarked, turning the conversation as she caught sight of the boat waiting for him.

"Yes. I wanted to see you before—before going away."

Her manner became thoughtful again.

"When do you go?" said she.

"In four days."

"Back to London?"

"Yes. I wish—is it too much to ask?—would

you send me two lines—no more—for the sake of our half-relationship, you know, just to tell me, to tell me—"

He was so eager that he could not make himself very clear. But she guessed his meaning and smiled gravely.

"Not for the sake of our relationship, which is not very clearly made out, I think, but for the sake of your— Well, never mind of what—perhaps you shall hear of or from me again—some day. What is your address?"

"May I write it down?"

"I shall remember it."

He gave her the address, and she listened in silence, with her eyes fixed intently on the sea. Then she said quickly, as if struck with a sudden thought of deep import,—

"Thank you. I must go now. If Pierre Vazon were to see me talking to you again he would make mischief —at least, he might. I don't trust him. Good-bye."

She held out her hand quickly; he pressed it one moment in his, with a thrill which communicated itself perhaps to her. She blushed a rosy red and drew her fingers sharply away.

"Good-bye," she said again.

And she was gone.

Bayre went back to the boat in a sort of fever. It cut him to the heart to think that this beautiful, bright girl, who affected him so strangely, should be in danger of becoming the wife of that commonplace Monsieur Blaise, with the roll of pink flesh at the back of his neck and the Panama hat and the blue glasses.

When he got back to his friends they were cool, sarcastic, courteous. It was a bad sign when they were courteous!

But they made friends again over an odd discovery. They ran against the beautiful Miss Eden that evening coming out of the telegraph office; and although they had no chance of so much as an exchange of greetings with her, the incident gave them something to talk about which it was imperative to discuss together.

They saw no more of the beauty before their holiday was over, and it was only too plain that she had forgotten the commission with which she had offered to entrust them.

When the last day of their stay arrived, and they piled their light luggage on one of the deck seats of the boat, with a melancholy feeling that the jolly time was over, they perceived a rough-looking peasant girl, in sabots, and bearing what looked like a fish-basket under her arm, standing on the quay looking down upon them.

Presently she came on board, but as she did not come near the spot where the three young men stood chatting and smoking, they took no particular notice of her movements until the boat started, when they saw her again on the quay-side, this time without her burden.

The morning was keen and cold, and there was a grey mist hanging over the water. They had not steamed far on their way when Repton shivered and returned to their light luggage to put on his overcoat.

He had scarcely reached the pile, however, when

a loud exclamation burst from his lips and attracted the attention of his two friends. Turning their heads, they saw him bending over something which had been placed among their things but which did not belong to them.

A second look convinced them that this addition to their luggage was nothing less than the fish-basket which the peasant girl had brought on board. And a third and closer look, when they had obeyed Repton's signal of alarm and joined him, showed them that the contents of the basket were alive.

"It's—it's a child! A—live—child!" gasped Repton, hoarsely.

And the consternation he felt was reflected on the faces of Southerley and Bayre.

CHAPTER VII

SOMEBODY'S LUGGAGE

THERE was no doubt about it; there, in the very middle of their pile of light luggage, some of which had been carefully displaced to make room for it, the three young men found the substantial basket they had last seen under the arm of the peasant girl on the quay; and in the basket, lightly covered over by a dark woolen shawl, through the meshes of which it could breathe perfectly well, was a live child.

Repton had moved the shawl, on seeing something move underneath, just far enough back to disclose the tiny face of a healthy-looking infant, some fifteen to eighteen months old, who, just waking from sleep, was staring up at the strangers with its face puckered in readiness for a good cry.

Repton was the first to ascertain this fact, and his increased consternation took a murderous form.

"Let's chuck it overboard!" cried he, with ferocity.

"Give it to the stewardess," suggested Southerly, more humanely.

Bayre, meanwhile, with presence of mind amounting to genius, had dashed forward and, seizing an indiarubber tube attached to a boat-shaped

bottle containing some opaque fluid which lay beside the child, had thrust it into the infant's mouth and thereby checked the utterance of its very first scream.

His friends looked at him in admiration, but the little group of passengers and ship's hands who had been attracted by the commotion looked with more derision than sympathy upon the heroic fellow as he made further investigations into this alarming article of luggage.

"It's not a peasant's child," he said, when he had noted the quality of the baby's clothes.

He had an idea in his head which he found it hard to get rid of. His uncle had a child, and that child had been kidnapped from the mother when she ran away from her husband, and had been left to the tender care of the Vazons. As far as he could judge, his uncle's child would be of about the same age as the infant in the basket. Could it be that this small pink and white thing which had been so mysteriously planted upon them was his own first cousin? And was it by some device of Miss Eden's, who mistrusted the Vazons, that the infant had been thus entrusted to the care of himself and his companions?

While the chatter and the chaff went on round about him, Bayre debated thus within himself, carefully examining the face of the now placid and contented infant with a scrutinizing care which sent a ripple of more or less subdued laughter round the group.

"Look here, you fellows, this child has not been dumped down here by accident," said he, with

a gravity which, instead of subduing them into attention, sent them into fits of renewed laughter. "I'm pretty sure we shall find upon it some intimation as to what we have got to do with it."

"I recommend," said Southerley, "that we put it in the captain's care to take back with him to Guernsey."

"That's it," said Repton. "And in the meantime we'll just find out who it is that has played us this trick. That girl who brought it on board must certainly have been known either to the captain or to some of the crew, and can easily be found by them."

It was remarkable, however, that, even as he made this suggestion, the curious group that had gathered round began to melt away; and Bayre was not surprised to find, upon inquiry, that nobody on board knew anything about the peasant girl, but that all who had seen her professed to have supposed that she was bringing some luggage belonging to one of the passengers in the ordinary way.

To consternation, to amusement, there succeeded indignation in the minds of both Repton and Southerley at the trick which had been played upon them. They had been made the laughing-stock of everybody on board, and they could find no one to help them out of the mess.

Both captain and stewardess flatly refused to undertake the responsibility of taking the child back to Guernsey, and the faces of two out of the three young men grew long at the prospect before them.

"We can't take the brat back to London with us," wailed Repton. "It's you, Bayre, with your confounded philanderings about the island by yourself, who must have brought upon us the reputation of being philanthropists and foundling hospitals, and homes for lost or starving children! And so I vote it's you who must leave it at the left luggage office at Weymouth. And if you won't do that, why, Southerley and I must leave *you* there, that's all."

"First," persisted Bayre, still haunted by his idea "let us see if there isn't a letter or direction of any kind packed in with the child."

"Well, fire away," said Repton, gloomily. "Here goes."

And as he spoke he pulled the brown woolen shawl right off the basket with a violent wrench.

As he did so the wind and the violent action together caused a letter, which had been placed in the basket under the shawl, to flutter over the side of the vessel into the sea.

"There you are! What did I tell you?" cried Bayre, excitedly, making a wild grab in the direction of the missive that would have made all clear to them.

To the fresh consternation caused by this mishap there succeeded a wild desire to stop the boat and to secure the precious letter. But the captain would not listen to Repton's loud expostulations on this subject, and the young man was driven half frantic between his own despair and the reproaches for his hasty action which his two companions did not hesitate to pour upon him.

In the meantime Southerley, partly out of bravado and partly out of real curiosity, had taken his turn at examining the child, and finally announced, with a great show of learning, that he knew from the shape of its headgear that it was a boy.

In his own mind, Bayre, who chose to keep his suspicions to himself, found this confirmation of his idea that the helpless creature who had been so unexpectedly entrusted to them was the heir to his uncle's property. For he knew that his uncle's child was a boy. At all hazards, then, the mite must be kept under his eye until he could find out what was the object of entrusting it to him and his companions in this mysterious manner. Once arrived in London he would write to Miss Eden and beg her to enlighten him upon the point.

If it was not the young girl herself who had contrived to send the infant in this manner to some place of greater safety than the cottage of the Vazons, she would at least be able to find out who had done so. As for the fact that she had given him no intimation of the strange commission, Bayre could not be surprised at it. For it was the sort of charge that a man might well have refused if he had known of it beforehand. So he reasoned with himself, and remembered at the same time that Miss Eden had spoken of some commission with which she thought of entrusting them.

In the meantime the child, having disposed of the opaque fluid in the bottle, struggled to sit up,

and then to get on its feet and survey the new and rather astonishing world in which it found itself.

Surveying it with the calm scientific curiosity with which a young animal in the Zoo would have inspired him, Southerley drew the attention of his companions to this fact, and even made some solemn and ill-received attempts to conciliate the monster by duckings of the head and twiddlings of the fingers, at which the child stared with grave eyes.

"It's not very intelligent," said Southerley, becoming suddenly haughty when he perceived that his antics were creating more amusement among the grown-up persons on board than they did in the object of his playfulness.

"Come, give it a chance," said Repton, whose first burst of indignation had already given place to something like active interest in the live animal which it seemed so impossible to get rid of. "Were *you* intelligent at eighteen months old?"

And recalling some of the ways by which comparative peace had been secured among the juvenile inhabitants of the nursery in which he had been one of a body of brothers and sisters, Repton began to show off his accomplishments in that direction by the production of his watch, with which he kept the enemy at bay for some minutes.

"He's not a bad sort of youngster, as youngsters go," he remarked apologetically, when both Bayre and Southerley began to smile at him in their turn. "But it's jolly cold for him up here. I vote we take him down below and lend him to the stewardess while we decide what's to be done with him."

But when they had carried him downstairs, an operation during which they were objects of general interest, they found it such a fascinating occupation to chat with the stewardess and to play with the child at the same time, that the minutes flew quickly by, and they were half-way across to the mainland before they woke to the fact that they were as far as ever from a conclusion as to what was to be done with their new and unwelcome possession.

By this time they had grown less barbarous in their intentions, so that Bayre's quiet announcement that he meant to take the child on to London, and to make inquiries from there as to its identity, met with but faint remonstrances.

"It's rum sort of luggage to bring back with one from abroad," protested Repton, with comparative meekness.

"An equivocal sort of possession, a baby!" suggested Southerley.

"It's all right among three of us," said Bayre, stoutly. "In numbers there is safety. Let us all show an equal amount of interest in him and we are safe from the breath of calumny. Nobody ever heard of a child with three fathers!"

"I don't know how to show interest in a child of such tender years," objected Southerley. "I'm ready to teach him Greek, but the question is whether he would be equally ready to learn."

"There I have the advantage of you," said Repton. "Painting, my profession, comes by nature. I've only got to put a brush in his hand

and a canvas in front of him and he'll go for it right away."

"And the tragic part of the business is that his productions will be quite as much sought after as his master's," remarked Southerley.

"What is to be your share in his education, Bayre?" asked the artist, ignoring the feeble sneer.

"Manners, I think," said Bayre, thoughtfully. "Manners and the use of the globes. Now any child who can whirl round a globe in its frame knows as much about the use of it as anybody."

"And now supposing we have some luncheon and drink the young man's health," suggested the convivial Repton.

The suggestion being well received, they left the baby, who was getting sleepy and rather fractious, in charge of the stewardess, and adjourned to the saloon, where, their spirits rising under the influence of cold beef and bottled Bass, they drank the health of the youth of whom they had so strangely become the responsible guardians, and fell in with Bayre's suggestion that they should throw themselves upon the mercy of Mrs. Inkersole, their London landlady, and get her to recommend them to some woman whom they could trust to look after the child.

"And meanwhile you, Bayre, solemnly undertake to find out who the actual possessor is, and to dispose of the infant to the lawful owner."

Bayre expressed his belief that he was equal to this task, and the matter was settled.

But the three temporary fathers soon found

that a railway journey in charge of a lively young man of eighteen months is not an unmixed joy.

A sort of terror had seized upon the whole party long before London was reached; and when they found themselves in the cab, with the child now happily asleep in his basket cradle in one corner, a solemn silence, broken only by hushed whispers of dismal import, fell upon them all as they reflected upon the coming interview with Mrs. Inkersole and the result it might have upon their long-standing tenancy.

"If she turns us out," growled Repton under his breath, tremulously anxious not to wake the slumbering terror, "we shall have to wander about the streets singing for our bread with the child in a basket on a barrow in front of us. For certain am I that no self-respecting landlady would ever take in as fresh lodgers three young men and a miraculous baby!"

"It's all your fault, Bayre," said Southerley, sombrely. "I'm certain we could have found some better way out of the mess than this but for your infernal obstinacy."

Bayre said nothing in particular. He was only too thankful to have got his own way, being, as he was, still in the belief that Miss Eden had wished him to take charge of the child, his uncle's son as he believed him to be, and to deliver him into the hands of some safer guardian. Here was a fine excuse for communicating with her, and he meant to avail himself of it that very night.

When they reached the house in the street off Tottenham Court Road they found their difficulties

begin at the very door. A determined attempt which Southerley and Repton were making to smuggle in the infant in its basket unremarked was foiled by a shrill squeal from under the brown woolen shawl as they reached the door-mat.

Susan, Mrs. Inkersole's most trusted lieutenant, uttered a gasp of amazement.

"Why, sir, what have you got there?" said she to Repton, who began to laugh idiotically, but without replying.

"Oh, it's nothing," said Southerley, testily, as he tried to rush the defences and to attain the staircase.

But Susan was firm.

"Is it a dog, sir?" she asked, seizing one end of the shawl and holding tight, while Repton looked at her fiercely, and Southerley showed an ominous disposition to drop his end of the basket and to run for it.

"Good gracious, no! What should we want a dog for?" said Repton, irritably.

"Because," went on Susan, with firmness, "Mrs. Inkersole can't abide dogs—"

"But I tell you it isn't a dog," roared Repton, infuriated by the renewed squeals, unmistakable in their origin, which by this time came from the basket. While at the same moment a well-developed pink leg, which had kicked itself free of shoe and sock, was suddenly protruded from the wraps with which it had been covered, leaving no possible doubt as to the species of the animal underneath.

"Is that a dog, do you think?" asked Repton,

with desperate calmness, pointing to the assertive limb.

Susan uttered a faint scream.

"Whatever do you gentlemen want with a baby?" she asked feebly.

"We don't want anything with it," replied the artist, fiercely. "We want to get rid of it, that's what we want. And if you know any person idiotic enough to wish to possess a healthy human infant, of the male sex and with perfectly developed lungs, why, give him or her our address, and tell him or her to apply early—"

"Hush!" broke in Susan in a frightened whisper.

And as she spoke she glanced towards the second door on the right, which was being softly opened and held ajar, as if some person behind it were listening to the conversation.

"What's the matter?" asked Repton, leaving Southerley to take the basket and its living contents up the stairs, with the help of Bayre, who had now followed the others into the house after settling with the cabman.

"Oh, there's a new lady in the dining-rooms—a student," replied Susan in a low voice. "And perhaps she wouldn't like it if she knew there'd be a child in the house crying half the day. But surely, sir, you don't mean to keep it there, do you?"

"I'm sure I don't know," said Repton, helplessly. "The little wretch was plumped down into the middle of our luggage when we came away this morning, and Mr. Bayre thought it

best to bring it on with us and to try to find out whom it belongs to from here. But it's a mad business. Here comes Mrs. Inkersole. Oh, shut her up! Tell her anything, anything!"

And unable to stand a strict examination on the part of the landlady with neither of his friends to back him up, Repton flew up the stairs and straight into his room on the second floor.

But in the front room the unfortunate infant was making its presence known by a succession of screams so piercing that all the three young men became possessed with a dreadful fear that it would shriek itself into a premature grave, and that they would conjointly be held responsible for its death in convulsions.

In vain they all three tried to soothe it. In vain Repton, seizing the milk-jug, which had been placed upon the table with the tea-things, tried to pour some of the milk into the child's mouth, a proceeding in which he nearly succeeded in choking him. In vain Southerley dangled his watch before the boy's eyes till he almost threw the works out of gear. In vain Bayre, the most anxious and miserable of the three, took the child in his arms and tossed it in the air with many frantic attempts to soothe and please it.

Still the unhappy and frightened babe screamed on, and was rapidly growing apopletic in his distress when they were all startled by a knock at the door.

"Oh, come in!" cried Bayre, foreseeing a terrible interview with the landlady which would bring their misfortunes to a climax.

But it was not Mrs. Inkersole who entered. Looking shyly round her, bowing to the three young men with a downcast and blushing face, there entered, quietly dressed in black, a woman, a beautiful young woman, tall, broad-shouldered, with fluffy fair hair and the face of an overgrown baby, just the placid-looking, womanly, slow-moving creature whom Bayre had pictured as his ideal.

CHAPTER VIII

BAYRE'S IDEAL

It is impossible to describe the scene of wild confusion which followed the lady's entrance. Bayre nearly dropped the baby and Repton the milk-jug. While Southerley, the only member of the party who retained a little self-possession, tried in vain, by placing himself between Bayre and the fair visitor, to hide the cause of all their woes.

A preposterous attempt this at the best, since there was no mistaking the unfortunate childs' cries for anything else.

But their consternation was speedily changed to relief. For the lady, with scarcely more than a glance at any one of the young men, burst into the middle of the group, and stretching out her arms with the true woman's instinct, took the child from Bayre's well-meaning but clumsy grasp, and holding him against her shoulder while she gently rocked herself to and fro from one foot to the other, spoke to him in words wholly unintelligible to the male ear, as women do to babies.

For a few seconds the young men stood looking shyly at this goddess who had been so miraculously sent to their assistance, admiring beyond

words the simple and instinctive art with which she accomplished in a few seconds what they had failed to do in all the hard work of a strenuous half-hour.

Fair-faced, blue-eyed, with one of those little Cupid's bow mouths that never go with any great intellectual capacity, the newcomer looked just one of those placid, domestic goddesses in praise of whom Bayre was accustomed to speak so highly, and of whom Southerley, on the other hand, expressed so much scorn.

There was a timidity, a modesty in every movement, in every look, which proved how strong must have been the inducement which brought her thus into a room full of strangers. A sort of deprecatory expression in her blue eyes, and a blush which overspread her face from chin to brow, seemed to struggle with the overwhelming feminine instinct which had brought her to the rescue of the crying child.

When the sobs had subsided a little and it was possible to hope to be heard, Southerley dragged forward the best armchair, and said,—

"Won't you sit down?" She shook her head, but he went on: "Do, please; you must let us have a moment to thank you for—for—for—"

"For saving us from the crime of murder," cried Repton, tragically, as the lady, after another moment's hesitation, sat down with the child in her lap.

"Oh, I'm sure you don't mean that," she said, in a low and gentle voice, as she looked down from him to the child. Then suddenly her tone

changed, and she asked sharply, "When was he fed last? I believe he's hungry."

There was a rush of men to the table, and the next moment they all clamored round her, offering such delicacies as a tin of sardines, a plate of winter apples, and some cheese.

The lady looked up and laughed mildly but scornfully.

"For a baby!" cried she. "Cheese! How absurd!"

"But he isn't a proper, natural baby," protested Repton, promptly. "Proper babies should drink milk, and when I offered him some he wouldn't have it."

"Let *me* try," said the lady.

And hugging the child against her breast with one hand, she held a cup of milk-and-water coaxingly to his lips with the other, when behold! he drank eagerly and peacefully, to the admiration of everybody.

"He's an artful little cuss," said Repton. "He must have guessed there was an angel—I mean a lady—in the house as soon as he came inside the door, and made up his mind to get her attentions all to himself or perish in the attempt."

The lady laughed again, but so low, so sweetly, that an answering smile appeared on the face of the child, whom she was now feeding with small morsels of bread-and-butter, with which she had silently beckoned Southerley to supply her.

"It's his own fault if he's hungry," said Southerley, earnestly. "I myself bought him a Banbury cake and a cold sausage on the journey and

scornfully.

"For a [illegible] she absurd!"

"But [illegible] a proper, nat... tested Reuben promptly. "[illegible] drink milk, and when I [illegible] wouldn't [illegible]"

[illegible] the lady.

And hugging [illegible] against [illegible] she held a cup of milk [illegible] its lips with the other, [illegible] eagerly and peacefully, [illegible] everybody.

He's an [illegible] cuss," [illegible] must have guessed the [illegible] lady—at [illegible] door, and [illegible] all to herself [illegible] The [illegible] [illegible] a [illegible] with [illegible] [illegible] [illegible] [illegible]

WHO'S HIS MOTHER?

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he wouldn't have either of them, except as weapons of offence."

"It's lucky he knew what was good for him better than you did!" said the lady.

"What would his mother say if she knew you'd tried to feed him with cold sausage?" cried Repton, regaining all his fancied superiority in the matter of infant management now that they no longer had the infant to manage.

The lady was still looking down upon the boy, who was as happy and good again as a child could be.

"Who is his mother?" she asked.

Dead silence.

The lady looked up and caught all the young men interrogating each other with their eye-brows.

"Don't you know?" she asked with an air of natural surprise.

After another moment's pause it was Bayre who boldly blurted out the truth.

"We haven't the least idea."

And he proceeded, in as few words as possible, to relate the whole story of their tragic experience of the day, to which the lady listened with wondering eyes.

"It's all very strange," said she. "But how very, very awkward for you!"

And then she burst out laughing, and the three young men, with a delightful feeling that this angel would help them out of their embarrassment, and that at any rate the baby had brought them a charming acquaintance, joined heartily in her merriment. Whereat the small boy made an

ineffectual attempt to clap his pudgy hands in sympathy.

The movement caught the woman's watchful eye, and she caught the child up to her neck and smothered him with kisses.

"Then—then," stammered she when, blushing a rosy red, she looked up after this caress, "at present the child is in the singular position of having no mother, but three fathers?"

"That's it exactly," laughed Repton.

"And the worst of it is," said Bayre, "that it's one of those cases in which three men are not equal to one woman."

The lady looked down at the child and hesitated.

"I suppose," she said, "that it won't be very long before you find out whom the child belongs to?"

"Oh, no," said Bayre, promptly. "We're going to set about making inquiries at once. I'm writing to-night."

"Who to?" cried Repton and Southerley in a breath, sinking grammar in their excitement.

But Bayre was dignified and reticent.

"Leave it to me," said he. "It's a matter where discretion is necessary."

Southerley and Repton exchanged looks of suspicion and scorn. This fellow was trifling with the truth; for they were artful enough to know that the person to whom this discreet creature would apply was the last person who could help him in such a matter—the pretty girl from Creux.

"And in the meantime?" asked the lady.

"In the meantime," said Southerley, promptly,

"we could not think of allowing the child out of our care. You see we feel responsible for him. We don't know who he is: the whole affair was very mysterious."

Then there was a long pause. All the young men were hoping for the offer which presently came from the charming visitor.

"I've got rooms here myself on the ground floor," she said. "After all, that's not so very far away, is it? Supposing you were to let me look after the child for you until you have found out what you have to do with him? You can get an answer to your letter in three or four days, I suppose?"

"Oh, yes," said Repton, eagerly.

"And you could trust me with him, couldn't you? I haven't had much experience with children," she went on, "but I've had a baby cousin to look after, and—"

"We could trust you implicitly," said Southerley, with unblushing magnanimity. "You have the real woman's instinct with children, that's certain."

The lady rose at once, cuddling the baby, who was growing sleepy again.

"Then I think I'll put him to bed at once," she said, "for it's plain that he's tired out. Poor—ickle—manny. Poor ickle manny! Didn't zey know what to do wiz a poor ickle mite-mite? Bye-bye. Cuddle down."

And as she crooned these words low in the ears of the child she crossed the room towards the door, leaving the three young men in a state of

subdued ecstasy. Then they all rushed to open the door for her.

But the stolid Southerley retained enough composure to say,—

"I beg your pardon, but—er—er won't you let us know your name? You see, as the responsible guardians of the child, we ought to be able to say in a moment, if we are asked, in whose care we've placed it."

The lady stopped in the doorway, laughed in some confusion, and answered hurriedly,—

"Oh—oh, yes, of course. My name is Merriman—Miss Merriman. Good-night."

The next moment she was gone.

The three men went back to the fireplace in complete silence. It was a fitting climax, this visit of the new beauty, to a wonderful day.

Repton broke the spell. Stretching his arms and drawing forth a deep sigh, he said,—

"Well, of all—!"

And then he paused.

Southerley pulled a chair up to the fire, arranged his feet over the fender to the exclusion of his companions, and became sentimental.

"Odd, how pretty that baby talk sounds from a woman's lips!" he said musingly. "I've always thought it so silly. But after hearing that handsome woman use it—by Jove!—I begin to see there's some meaning in it after all!"

"She's certainly handsome," said Repton, "very handsome. And handsome inside and out, mind. The way she looked at that child showed the sort of woman she was—motherly, domestic, *safe*.

By-the-bye, Bayre, there's your ideal ready to hand, my boy!—gentle, placid, slow-moving, possibly not too quick-witted, and handsome besides. What could you wish for more?"

But before Bayre could reply, Southerley struck in, with some irritation,—

"What's it got to do with him? He's too much taken up with Miss Eden to have any thoughts to spare for anybody else. I suppose he doesn't intend to monopolize all the women in the world."

"I don't know that I've monopolized so much as one yet," said Bayre, meekly, from his corner.

He had thrown himself back in a chair away from the others, and was looking thoughtful.

"What's the matter, Bayre?" asked Repton.

"I've got an idea."

"Bless me! You don't say so. What are you going to do with it?"

"I'm going," said Bayre, rising slowly from his chair with the same grave look on his face, "to put it into words, and to put those words into a letter. Good-night, you fellows!"

And with a nod he went out of the room.

But when it came to the point of taking pen in hand and beginning that momentous letter to Miss Eden, Bayre found his courage fail him. And instead of expressing the idea of which he had spoken, he contented himself with giving her the bare details of the adventure with the baby, the loss of the letter which had been on the child, and the appearance on the scene of the opportune Miss Merriman. Then he ran out, posted his letter, which he had written in studiously careful terms,

that she might not think he was presuming upon their short acquaintance, and went back to his room in a state of considerable suspense.

The suspense continued for days, and went on for a whole fortnight, for Miss Eden vouchsafed no reply.

In the meantime, however, neither Miss Merriman nor the other two young men appeared to take greatly to heart the unexpected continuation of the period of their guardianship of the miraculous baby. Every day these three good fathers, mindful of their responsibilities, called dutifully at the ground-floor sitting-room, where they interviewed the object of their solicitude, and expressed their gratitude to Miss Merriman in trifling gifts of flowers and bonbons, which she was reluctant to accept, but which, as they pointed out to her, she was bound to allow them to bring, since she refused to let them pay for the large quantities of bread-and-butter and sponge-cake, milk and beef-tea, which their *protege* consumed.

So that the period of suspense proved entirely supportable to two out of the three young guardians, and it was only Bayre who chafed under it.

He pointed out that they could not allow Miss Merriman to burden herself indefinitely with the care of another person's child, and grew so fervid in his conscientious scruples on this head that nothing would satisfy him but to get leave of absence again (not without difficulty and even perjury in a mitigated form) and to return to Guernsey with the avowed intention of solving the mystery of the child's parentage, and with an

unavowed intention which both Repton and Southerley had no difficulty in divining.

The weather had changed for the worse since his first journey to the islands. It blew a gale as he crossed, and the snow and sleet drove in his face as he persisted in remaining on deck, watching for the first glimpse of the rocky coast.

But the atmosphere was not clear enough for him to discern anything until the vessel was close to harbor, and the thin white covering to road and roof, cliff and steeple, made everything ghostly and dismal in the light of a grey March day.

Bayre went straight to Madame Nicolas' house, and, as he had taken the precaution to telegraph, he found an appetizing breakfast waiting for him.

Keeping Madame in conversation, all with one object in view, he began by questioning her on indifferent subjects, and gradually worked round to the one thing of which his heart and mind were full.

Whether Madame had heard anything of the adventure with the baby he did not know, as she did not mention it, nor did he.

It was after a little pause for breath on her side that he presently asked, as if the matter were of no particular interest to him,—

"By-the-bye, have you seen anything of old M. Bayre and his young ward since we were here?"

Madame stood up and stared at him strangely.

"Oh, haven't you heard?" she said in a low voice.

Bayre could scarcely keep his voice steady.

"Heard what?" said he.

"Why, the young lady was to be married to a gentleman of the island—this island—a Monsieur Blaise."

"Yes, yes, so I heard. Well?"

"The wedding was arranged, so I understand; it was to be very quiet."

"Yes."

"Well, the young lady has disappeared."

Bayre started up, his brain on fire.

"It's not—it can't be true!" he cried hoarsely.

CHAPTER IX

A MYSTERY

MADAME NICOLAS looked at Bartlett Bayre with a shrewd suspicion in her eyes. It was evident that the young man took much more than the interest of a casual stranger in Miss Eden's disappearance.

She shrugged her shoulders and shook her head.

"*Ma foi*, monsieur, I do not myself think it so surprising that a good-looking girl like Miss Eden should object to being married off to a man old enough to be her father, and by no means attractive at that. Not that I have a word to say against Monsieur Blaise, who is a most worthy gentleman, and well-to-do. But one must make allowance for the natural tastes of a young girl, especially of a girl whose father was an Englishman.

Bayre heard very little of these words, and he presently broke in, with great suddenness,—

"When did she disappear?"

"I understand she has not been seen for three days."

Bayre rose from the table with a strange look on his face and walked straight towards the door.

"Where are you going, monsieur?" asked his hostess, rather alarmed by the effect of her words.

She knew of the relationship between him and the recluse of Creux, and she felt uneasy lest the young man should take some aggressive action against the magnate, which might possibly get her into bad odor among her neighbors. For, like all the inhabitants of small islands, the natives were clannish, and strongly resented any interference from outsiders.

Bayre had his fingers upon the handle.

"I'm going to try to find out what has become of her," said he, "and to see the Creux people about it."

"Oh, nobody fears a tragedy," she said quickly, though her tone was not particularly reassuring. "It is some girlish freak, no doubt. And in a few days she will return to her guardian's house, satisfied with having given this little proof of spirit."

But this suggestion did not satisfy Bayre, who knew more of the sensitive and emotional girl, after two or three short interviews, than the majority of the islanders would have found out in a couple of years' acquaintance. Remembering as he did the change which came over her after her introduction to her proposed husband, he could not even feel that her disappearance was a matter of great surprise. That she could conceive the idea of running away, either back to the school she had left in France, or to friends in England, seemed to him a perfectly possible thing. Yet surely, if she had followed such a course, she would have been recognized on the journey! The boats were not crowded at that early season of the

year, and she was of course well-known by sight to the people whom she must meet on such a journey.

Full of fears which he dared not define, Bayre left the house and made his way towards the harbor. As luck would have it, one of the very first persons who attracted his attention as he approached the quay was the peasant girl who had placed the baby in its basket among the luggage of the three friends. She was some distance away from him, sauntering towards him with a market basket on her arm, and chatting with another girl of about the same age and class. He saw her before she saw him; but as soon as he attracted her attention by quickening his pace to meet her, she stopped, turned pale, uttered a frightened exclamation, then turned and ran away at the top of her speed, her sabots clanking noisily on the ground as she went.

Of course he gave chase. But in a locality where she was at home and he was not, it was easy for her to escape him.

Baffled in his pursuit, and rendered more curious than ever by the guilty knowledge he had descried on her face, Bayre stopped in a chase which was exciting the amusement of casual passers-by, and retraced his steps towards the quay.

He decided that it would not be very difficult to trace this girl at a later time, since it was plain that she frequented the town, even if she did not live in it. In the meantime his first inquiries must be made in Creux.

He got nothing out of the boatmen who took

him across to the little island; they had heard of the disappearance of the young lady, and one crudely and callously suggested that she might have drowned herself as the result of a love affair.

It was not gay at Creux! And for a young girl, too! Monsieur Bayre was an eccentric, a droll man! Strange things had happened on the island before. But there—let each man mind his own affairs and the world would go on very well.

Neither of the men would be more explicit than this: they had their living to get, and great part of it was got in the summer time by taking visitors to Guernsey across the water to Creux to see the famous museum, as they called the treasure-filled mansion of the old recluse.

Bayre began to understand how little sympathy he should meet with in the course of his investigations. Whatever freaks his uncle might be guilty of, he was held in reverence here as a Grand Seigneur, a man of wealth, and a source of legitimate income or of splendid charity.

When Bayre landed on his uncle's little island, his overcoat buttoned up to the chin, his cap well drawn over his eyes, and his body bent to meet keen wind and driving snow, he knew that for all he might find out concerning Miss Eden's disappearance and his uncle's eccentricities he must depend upon himself alone.

Nevertheless, he took the strongly-built cottage of Pierre Vazon on his way, although the truth was the last thing he expected to hear from the lips of that unprepossessing person.

The home of the Vazons was a large stone-built

cottage, built on a rather bleak spot, and sheltered only by a few now bare trees, and by its own outbuildings. There was nobody to be seen about outside, and it is impossible to exaggerate the desolation of the aspect of the whole island, seen thus through the driving snow, which had already covered the ground to the extent of an inch or so, making the sea around it appear of an inky darkness.

Bayre went boldly up to the cottage and looked in at the window as he passed. And he received a great shock on seeing that Marie Vazon, who was sitting by the window with her sewing, had a child, a well-dressed child, in a cradle at her feet.

Here then was a blow at one of his cherished beliefs. It was Marie Vazon who had charge of his uncle's infant son, and the identity of the child who had been entrusted to the care of him and his friends was now as mysterious as ever.

As he stopped at the window, gazing in with an expression of bewilderment and dismay on his face, Marie Vazon noticed that a shadow was darkening the window and glanced up.

He saw a swift look of amazement and alarm pass over the stolid peasant face and then she looked quickly down again and went on with her sewing.

Bayre hesitated as to whether he should enter the cottage and make some inquiries there, or push on for his uncle's house. While he debated with himself, he heard a rough voice behind him, and Pierre Vazon came up, greeting him in his French *patois*, in a manner half servile, half insolent.

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"You are back again soon, monsieur," said he, placing himself in front of the young man, and looking at him askance. "It is bad weather for travelling now."

"Yes," said Bayre.

"Monsieur must have strong reasons to bring him across in the snow and the bitter cold," went on the man, with scarcely veiled curiosity.

"I hear you have had a strange event since my last visit," said Bayre, without answering his implied question. "Is it true that Miss Eden is no longer here with her guardian?"

"*Parbleu*, monsieur, so it seems. We have seen nothing of her for two days. But your English young ladies—and Miss Eden was very English—they are so independent, we were not much surprised to find she had ended by thinking Creux too quiet for her."

"You mean that no attempt has been made to find her, either by you or by her guardian, Mr. Bayre?"

"Well, monsieur, I hunted all over the island for her, and my daughter too, as well as she could. But she has Monsieur Bayre's child to look after," went on the man, keeping his interlocutor fixed steadily with his small slits of eyes, "so that she has not much time for anything else."

It occurred to Bayre as strange that the man should watch him in this peculiar fashion while he made this statement about the child, but he could think of no adequate reason for doubting the truth of his words. At the same time an impulse of curiosity made him ask abruptly,—

"Can I see the child?"

Pierre looked at him askance and shook his head.

He seemed to be searching for an excuse, Bayre thought. At last he found one.

"Since you have not been received by Monsieur Bayre, monsieur," said Vazon, "I don't know whether I ought to let you see his child."

Bayre shrugged his shoulders.

"As you like," said he.

And turning on his heel abruptly, he saw, as he passed the cottage window once more, that Marie Vazon was no longer sitting within. Looking round, he caught sight of Pierre disappearing hastily within the door of the cottage, and heard him turn the key in the lock. So, with one more look in at the window to ascertain whether the baby in the cradle was really alive, a fact which the infant obligingly proved by thrusting a crumpled fist outside its covering, he started in the direction of the mansion.

What was wrong? What was going on here in this forgotten little spot of earth cut off by the sea from the rest of mankind?

That something was amiss Bayre was sure. Vague as his suspicions were, impossible as it was for him to make out what it was that he feared, there was such a strangely unsatisfactory atmosphere surrounding Pierre Vazon and his daughter, such a disquieting air of mingled servility and insolence in their address, such an expression of low cunning on both their faces, that the more he

considered the matter the more uneasy Bayre became.

That they had had any hand in the disappearance of Miss Eden he did not believe. Why should they lay themselves open to ugly suspicions by interfering with a person who was not likely to stand in the way of their interests? If she had been the darling of her guardian's heart, and they had suspected him of designing to benefit her in his will to the exclusion of their claims upon him, Bayre might have conceived it possible that the cunning peasants should have motives for getting her out of the way.

But everything went to show that, so far from being fond of his ward, the old man looked upon her simply as a burden and an unwelcome guest, to be got rid of by marriage as quickly as possible.

Far more likely was it that the high-spirited girl, after a scene of resistance to old Mr. Bayre's wishes in the matter of her marriage, had broken the ties between her and her guardian and left the island of her own accord.

But surmise was not enough; he felt that he must have fact to satisfy him. And the person to whom he would apply was his uncle himself. He would not be put off this time. And as he marched up the avenue under the snow-laden branches of the leafless trees, he resolved that he would take no denials, that he would gain admittance by hook or by crook to the presence of the mysterious recluse, and would try to probe to the reason of the strange dislike to meeting him which his uncle had shown.

He pulled the old-fashioned iron handle, and heard the bell clang through the house. Almost without a moment's waiting he found the door opened; but a new thrill of suspicion and dismay struck a chill to his heart when he found that it was again Marie Vazon who had opened it to him.

His astonishment for the moment took away his powers of speech. She must have run up to the great house while he was in conversation with Pierre. And his hopes of getting admittance grew low as he met her cunning blue eyes and noted that she did not open the door very wide.

She waited for him to speak.

"I wish to see Monsieur Bayre, my uncle," he said boldly at last.

Marie drew the door a little closer, shook her head, and smiled.

"Ah, monsieur, I regret that Monsieur Bayre cannot receive you—cannot receive anybody. He is ill—ill in bed," said she.

"Will you take him my card? And I should like to scribble a few words on it first."

He had taken out his pocket-book and found a card before he perceived that Marie Vazon had deftly and without noise put the chain on the door. Too indignant to say another word, he gave up the intention of writing anything on the card, and merely passing it to the girl through the narrow opening that was left, he went away.

What did this mean?

If he had not remembered that it was his uncle himself who had given the first intimation of his

unwillingness to meet him, Bayre would now have suspected that the Vazons, for some reason of their own, wished to prevent the coming together of their master and himself. But with his two attempts to speak to his uncle, and his previous repulsion from the very house fresh in his mind the young man could scarcely entertain this idea.

What then could be the motive for this marvellous eccentricity? He had never heard, from any of the inhabitants of the island, a hint that his uncle was other than perfectly sane, or he might have ascribed this shyness to a caprice of insanity.

On the contrary, although all were agreed that his two recent misfortunes, the loss of his wife and the death of his cousin, had had a great effect upon him, yet everybody spoke highly of the old man as a good neighbor and a generous benefactor. How could his nephew's visit in the company of his two friends be looked upon as an intrusion which justified such persistent and aggressive snubs?—snubs which seemed inconsistent with the known character of the man, and which nothing in his nephew's personal history could be held to justify.

So mysterious, so incomprehensible did his uncle's whole conduct seem, that Bayre conquered his first impulse, which was to turn his back upon the house with all possible speed, and resolved instead to play the spy a little, not more in the interests of his own natural curiosity than in his intense desire to learn what had become of Miss Eden.

When he had reached the avenue, therefore, he slackened his steps, and getting through the thin hedge on the left without difficulty, approached the house once more, this time by way of the other side, where a thick plantation had been partly cleared for a smooth lawn which, now an undulating sheet of snow, stretched away from the house to the sheltering wood behind.

A curious building it was, this low-roofed, rambling mansion, which had evidently grown to its present dimensions from a most modest country villa. The original building it was that Bayre came to first, a white-washed pile of simplest architecture, the ground-floor windows of which were closed up with heavy shutters. Most desolate did they look, these long windows down to the ground, with the closed shutters behind them. Beyond these he came to a stone extension, with a row of windows narrow and high, at least ten feet from the ground. He looked up at them with interest. There were no shutters to these, but he could see that there were iron bars on the inner side.

Bayre went further in his search and passed round a protruding wing, beyond which was a courtyard where the stones were moss-grown, little patches of green peeping up between the snow-drifts.

There was a sort of atmosphere about this corner which suggested the home of the sleeping beauty, for the trees had been allowed to grow as they liked, and their branches straggled across the pathway which led from this point through the

wood. There was a stable, small for the size of the mansion, as was to be expected on the island: it appeared to be untenanted, and one of the windows was broken. The servants' quarters, which were at this end of the house, had a desolate appearance. Bayre could hear certain sounds of work going on within; but it was rather the clanking of one pair of sabots on the flagged floor, and the clatter caused by one, or at most two, pair of hands, than the life and bustle of a large establishment.

He turned into the footpath, came upon a stiff-terraced garden with some mournful evergreens and still more mournful statues, and turned back towards the house.

It was that row of long, narrow windows high up in the wall that fascinated him and made him wonder what was behind: for this part of the house looked like a scrap of mediævalism wedged awkwardly between the products of other periods. Here, he thought, must be the treasures of which he had heard so much. As he stood looking upwards and wondering what was within, a strange sound reached his ears, as of the splintering of wood, the rattling of boards, and blows with a heavy instrument upon some hard substance. A movable pane in the window immediately over his head, opened for ventilation, enabled him to ascertain that these sounds came from the interior of the building.

The surface of the stone wall was rough: the young man's curiosity was great. After a moment's hesitation he threw his scruples to the winds, and

with the assistance of an ill-kept growth of ivy which covered the lower part of the wall under some of the windows, managed to hoist himself to the level of one of them and to look in.

When his eyes, dazzled by the glare of the snow outside, had got used to the obscurity within, he found himself gazing upon a spectacle so strange, so grim, that he began to have a sort of feeling that the cold must have benumbed his senses and distorted his vision, so that real objects took the fantastic shape of things seen in dreams.

In the dimness of an open timber roof he saw winged things fluttering about, perching on the beams, uttering odd little twitterings and cooings in the darkness. On the wall opposite to him there were tapestries, some almost colorless with age, and some beautiful in tints which, in the dim light, all took a softening tone of tender mouse grey. There were glints of steel, too, against these hangings; here and there a ghostly figure in ancient armor, with lance in rest and helmet plumed, stood out from the dim background.

Clinging with difficulty to the narrow slanting ledge, Bayre looked in with eager eyes, saw these things before him, and at one end, hazy in the distance, a gallery crossing the great hall from end to end, where old silver lamps hung by chains from above, and where the pipes of an organ and the graceful outlines of a harp gleamed faintly out of the misty grey.

The other end of the hall he could not see.

But he saw pictures hanging below the level of the windows, and on the floor beneath something that groped its way along slowly and painfully like an animal hunting for food.

Dog, or wild beast, or what? For a long time Bayre strained his eyes, unable to make out what that dark object was that groped and groped, at first quietly, and then with a sudden impulse of impatience, in the obscurity below him.

His heart seemed to leap up with an indescribable sensation which was partly horror and partly sheer amazement, when the creature suddenly reared up from the dark boards of the floor and showed the face of a man, withered, haggard, tense with an unearthly eagerness of longing.

"My uncle!"

The words were formed by the young man's lips, but they did not reach the stage of uttered sound. He was, indeed, too sick with amazement at this uncanny sight to be able to speak at that moment.

Before he quite knew what the impression was which this sight had made upon him, the figure in the old dark coat was bending again upon the floor, and Bayre saw him raise a hatchet over his head and bring it down sharply upon the boards.

That fact was enough. Only one explanation, surely, could there be of the action of a man who would set to work to destroy his own dwelling in such a manner.

But before the young man had had time for another look, another thought, he suddenly found himself seized by the legs from below, and turning, saw that Pierre Vazon, with alarm and dismay on his face, and another and younger man, also in a blouse, had made him prisoner.

CHAPTER X

OR A CRIME?

BAYRE did not wait for a second summons to descend. He kicked himself free of the grasp of his captors and slid down to the ground beside them.

"*Mon Dieu!* monsieur, this is a strange way to visit a gentleman's house!" cried Vazon, stammering with indignation and evident alarm. "I took you for a burglar, a thief. What do you want haunting a gentleman's house when he will not allow you inside?"

"My uncle is mad," replied Bayre, shortly.

"Mad? No. Not more mad than country gentlemen always are when they live by themselves and have nobody to contradict their whims," retorted the plain-spoken peasant, scoffingly. "I call it more like madness for a gentleman to play the spy upon his relations and to hang about where he has been given to understand that he is not wanted."

"I shall have an inquiry made into this," said Bayre, shortly. "There are others concerned."

And he walked away without further comment.

That he had alarmed Pierre Vazon by this threat of bringing outside inquiry into the matter

was evident a few moments later when Pierre came running down the avenue after him, his manner changed from insolence to abject servility.

"One moment, monsieur," he cried, gaining his point by his earnestness, and inducing the young man to stop and listen. "Pardon my rough manners if I said anything to displease you. I am but a peasant, with the manners of the soil. Remember, I love my master; I've served him many years now, and the thought that he should be interfered with, even in his caprices, seems like treason to me. Look here, monsieur. I know monsieur your uncle is eccentric; everyone knows it. But it is the eccentricity of a good man, a generous one, one with a good heart. If he amuses himself as others do not, where is the harm? Leave him in peace to enjoy the few years of life remaining to him, months only, it may be, for he is old and broken now."

Doubtful though he was of Vazon's entire good faith, the young man could not help being touched by his earnestness, and he promised not to do anything rashly or without due thought.

"But mind," he went on, "I am not going to leave the island again without having seen my uncle and judged of his condition with my own eyes. So I warn you that, when I return, as I shall do in a few days, you had better rather help me than hinder me in my purpose of getting an interview with him."

The old peasant gave a curious glance at the dark sea, which was already even rougher than it had been a couple of hours before, when Bayre came across from St. Luke's. And Bayre wondered whether the old man was speculating as to the chances of communication between the islands being cut off, as it was sometimes in the winter, by the spell of tempestuous weather.

"Certainly, certainly, monsieur, I will do my best, my very best. And when Pierre Vazon gives his word it is as the word of a gentleman."

And with this parting speech, uttered with an air of uncouth dignity, raising his cap with great deference, Pierre Vazon disappeared in the direction of his own cottage.

Bayre hastened to the landing-place, where the boat was waiting to take him back. It was a very difficult matter to embark, and the two men in charge of the little craft whistled softly to themselves as they started on the return journey over the wild water, as sailors do under the excitement of a stormy day at sea.

The waves dashed into the open boat, which carried very little sail, for wind and sea ran high; and half a dozen times before the party reached St. Luke's they were threatened with the submerging of the boat.

A little knot of people assembled on the pier to watch the boat as, cleverly handled by the two men, it crested the waves and finally ran into shelter. And there, in the very front rank of the

watchers, Bayre saw, to his surprise and delight, the peasant girl whom he wished to trace. He hid his face so that he might get out of the boat without her seeing him. But when he had landed, amidst the congratulations of the fishermen, who told him it was a risky thing to go out in such a sea, the young man was surprised to note that the girl did not attempt to run away on catching sight of him, but stared as if she had forgotten him altogether.

His first thought was that he must be mistaken and that this could not be the girl who had taken the baby on board. But a second inspection made him change his mind; and when she turned slowly away, talking to another girl, and making her way unconcernedly up the town, he followed at a safe distance, quite convinced that he was right after all, and that she was indeed the girl who had avoided him that morning.

She passed from the harbor to the market-place, and thence up the one hundred and forty-five steps into the New Town, Bayre still following, and wondering whither this expedition would lead him. For he was not without suspicions that she might trick him after all, and that he might find himself at the end of his journey no wiser than at the beginning.

Right out of the town she went, and inland across country that looked bleak and uninteresting, with its scant supply of bare trees and its flat enclosures.

The snow no longer fell, but the wind was still high. And by the time the girl had reached the byway which led to a small stone farmhouse, the day had begun to draw in towards evening.

He lingered in the background till he saw her enter the little dwelling, and then, resolved to find out the truth about the child if possible, he went up the lane and knocked boldly at the door by which she had entered.

It was opened at once—by Miss Eden.

The cry of joy he uttered at the sight of her was so spontaneous, so heartfelt, that the young girl, who was smiling and holding out her hand, blushed and looked down as she met his glowing eyes.

"Come in," she said

And then, when he stepped into the beamed living-room, and saw the peasant girl grinning at him sympathetically from the back-ground, he could not doubt that he had been made the victim of a most pleasant little plot between the two young women.

"This," said Miss Eden, leading him across the stone-flagged floor, with its neat strips of home-made carpet, to a wooden armchair, where an old woman in an all-round white cap sat knitting by the fire, "is M. Bayre's nephew, Madame Portelet."

The old woman gave him a smileless but not uncordial welcome, speaking in the muffled tones of the deaf. And then Miss Eden turned to the young girl.

"It was Nini here who led you into this trap, by my command, Mr. Bayre." Nini dropped a curtsey. "When she saw you in the town this morning she came back and reported the fact. And then she went back and decoyed you here."

Bayre was bewildered. Into all the delight he felt at finding Miss Eden safe and sound there would obtrude the pain of the mystery which surrounded not only her but his uncle and the unidentified baby. He began to feel, too, that he should never have the courage to ask all the questions he would have liked to have answered.

Miss Eden, indeed, led the talk as she liked. He fell instinctively into the position of her adoring humble servant, and accepted the tea she made for him, and the bread-and-butter which she cut with her own hands, without anticipating by so much as a word the moment when she would choose to enlighten him as to her strange position.

The time came at last. Nini had disappeared with the tea-tray into the back regions of the farmhouse, and Miss Eden led him to the window and sat down, while he stood leaning against the opposite end of the deep window-seat.

"You are surprised to see me here," she said.

"I—I was only too delighted to s-s-see you anywhere," stammered he. "When they told me you had disappeared, I—I—"

"Did you think I had drowned myself?" asked she with a pretty sauciness which enthralled him.

"I—I don't know what I thought."

"What has brought you back here?"

He looked at her, hesitated, and then stammered out,—

"Y-y-you, chiefly, I think."

"Thank you. But—I don't understand how I can have had anything to do with it."

"Did you get my letter?"

"Yes."

"You didn't answer it. Yet you half-promised—"

"To answer you if you wrote? I don't remember doing that."

"No. But you did promise to let me hear of or from you some day."

"Ah! That's vague, isn't it?"

"In the meantime at least—thank Heaven!—you have thrown over old Blaise."

"How do you know that?"

"Wasn't it to escape him that you ran away?"

"Not altogether, I think. Though I admit that his likeness to everybody else of his generation was rather excessive."

"Why have you run away then?"

In the dim light, which came partly from the waning daylight and partly from a dim little lamp, he saw that she grew very pale as she answered,—

"I—I had a fright."

Remembering what he had seen that day, Bayre was on the alert in a moment.

"Ah!" said he. "Was it my uncle who frightened you? Tell me all about it. Indeed,

I know something of the cause already, I think."

She leaned forward and spoke in a low voice.

"Since you and your friends went away," she began, "Mr. Bayre has shown a strange restlessness and irritability; and instead of merely treating me with indifference, as he did before, he has seemed to take an absolute and strong dislike to me, so much so that he scarcely spoke to me without harshness, or a sort of querulousness still more difficult to endure. And in the meantime the two Vazons, who presume upon having the care of your uncle's child"—Bayre listened intently to these words, but dared make no remark upon them—"kept more closely about him than ever, and evidently influenced the way he treated me. Naturally I resented this. And I resented, too, the way in which I was being thrown into the arms of this good Monsieur Blaise, who, I must tell you, is by no means so deeply enamored of my charms as your uncle wished to make out, but who seemed rather to submit to the thought of marrying me than to show any enthusiasm over it."

"What!" cried Bayre, indignantly. "I can't believe it! Is he deaf and blind?"

Miss Eden laughed and blushed very prettily.

"I'm sure I don't know," said she, "but at any rate you could see for yourself that he is past the age at which a man rushes headlong into matrimony. It seems he made careful inquiries into my 'dot,' and was disappointed to find I had only seventy pounds a year of my own.

"The cad! The rascal!"

"Oh, not at all! Much more prudent than to dash into marriage, as some very silly young Englishmen might do—"

"Yes, yes, so they might—"

"Without making careful inquiries into their responsibilities. Well, he submitted with a good grace to my poverty-stricken condition, and things were in a very nice train, when—when—something happened, something that frightened me."

"What was it?" asked Bayre, leaning down and guessing what sort of incident it was that had caused her alarm.

"It was something that made me think I ought to have time to find out a little more, and to consult somebody as to what I ought to do. Something which made me wonder whether I should do so wisely as I had supposed in following your uncle's advice as to my marriage."

"Yes, yes, go on. You saw something about him that made you suspect—what?"

"Why, that there's someone living at the *château* besides himself."

Bayre started back, staring at her in perplexity, as the memory of his discovery of that afternoon returned vividly to his mind.

"Someone besides himself! Who?" asked he, sharply.

"I don't know. But it's someone nobody knows anything about except himself and the two Vazons," said Miss Eden. "And—and—I think it's—a woman."

Bayre stood up, struck with a horrible thought. Was his uncle keeping his own young wife shut up in his house with himself and the two Vazons for gaolers?

CHAPTER XI

RIVALS

"TELL me all you know about this," said Bayre, abruptly, when he had silently pondered for some moments on Miss Eden's statement. "You may trust me. You wouldn't have told me so much if you hadn't felt sure of that."

"That's true. Well, what I know amounts to very little. But one day, as I was walking in the garden close to that end of the house that's shut up—"

"Where the windows open down to the ground?" asked Bayre.

"The room next to that one it was, the very last room of all, where there are two windows barred on the outside and shuttered on the inside. You may not have noticed them, for there's a creeper which has been neglected, a Virginia creeper, on that corner of the house; and the long dead branches hang like great bunches of string down over the windows."

Bayre remembered the ragged Virginia creeper, though he had failed to notice the iron bars behind them, or the fact that these two windows were shuttered like those of the longer room beyond.

"Well?" said he.

"It was late one afternoon," she went on, "that I saw the shutters of one of these windows put back and a hand thrust out to open the window. I was startled, and I must have made some sound, for I saw that the hand was a woman's, and that the fingers were loaded with rings. It was drawn back instantly, and I heard a sort of tussle going on inside the room, and voices speaking low and hurriedly. And presently someone came to the window and looked out: but it was not the woman; it was your uncle. He looked down at me angrily, shut the window and closed the shutters."

"You asked him about it, of course?"

"I shouldn't have dared. But he told me, of his own accord, that he had caught one of the maids decking herself out in some jewelry which he kept in a locked-up room."

"And may not that have been the truth?"

"I don't think so. There are only three women about the house at any time: Marie Vazon, who is the only one who might dare such a thing, lives at her father's, and is not very much at the big house at all. The other two are an old woman and her niece, neither of whom dares to stay a minute longer out of the servants' quarters than she can help. And all three women have hands which are large and red, and the fingers of which could not wear rings of ordinary size. Well, such rings as I saw—valuable as they must have been if they were real—are not made in extraordinary sizes!"

"Do you think, then, that it's his young wife he is keeping shut up there?"

By the look of consternation which passed over Miss Eden's face, Bayre saw that this idea had not occurred to her.

"I never thought of that," she said quickly. Then, as this suggestion seemed to fill her with horror, she cried quickly, "Let's ask Nini about her. Oh, no, oh, no, I'm sure it can't have been his wife."

And Miss Eden rose from her seat, and hurrying across the room, opened a door at the back and brought in the peasant girl with a teacup in one hand and a cloth in the other.

"Nini lived at your uncle's house all the time from before his marriage till a few weeks ago, when her grandmother had to send for her to come back here to her own home," explained Miss Eden. "Ask her and she will tell you what she thought of young Mrs. Bayre, and whether she was the kind of person who could be shut up against her will. You can ask her in English or French; she speaks both."

Nini, who looked intelligent for her class, nodded assent to this speech, looking down modestly upon the floor. But Bayre had a sort of idea that, simple as she looked, he should get no one word more out of her than she chose to give. Obediently, however, he began to ask her questions.

"You were at Creux when young Madame Bayre ran away?"

"Yes, sir."

"Did you see her run away?"

"No, sir. She took Marie Vazon with her. She had better have taken me. I shouldn't have left her in the lurch and let her go off without her child as Marie did."

"Ah! The child! Was that the child you brought on board in a basket and dumped down among the luggage of my friends and me?" asked Bayre, with what he considered to be startling suddenness.

But Nini was on her guard, of course.

"*Plait-il?*" she asked blandly, raising her eyes stolidly to his face.

"You won't own to that, I see," he said irritably. And turning shortly to Miss Eden, he observed, with some constraint,—

"This girl is the heroine of the incident I wrote to you about from London, Miss Eden. It was she who planted a young child among our luggage. I'm sure of it."

There was a moment's silence. Nini did not attempt any further contradiction. She looked stolidly down on the flagged floor again and waited for further questions. Miss Eden's conduct was equally unsatisfying.

"There must be some mistake, I think," she said. "But, in any case, that's not the matter under discussion, is it?"

"If she won't tell the truth in one matter it's not likely she will in another," said Bayre, dryly.

"Let me try," said Miss Eden, sweetly, and she addressed the girl at once. "What sort of life did they lead at the *château* when

old Mr. Bayre brought back his young wife, Nini?"

"It was not very comfortable, mademoiselle. Young Madame did not like Mees Ford, and Mees Ford did not like young Madame. Mees Ford was all for save, save: Madame liked ease, comfort, expense. Madame did not like to see her husband always consulting his cousin instead of her. Madame want her husband always to go away, especially when the baby came. It was not gay for Madame, who was young, to sit always in the great *salon*, the room where the shutters are now always closed, with that effigy, Mees Ford, opposite to her, knit, knit, knitting always as if for her life. One, two, three, four, always, count, count, counting. And poor young Madame sitting opposite, yawning over a book. Even her child was not allowed to be with her much. Old M. Bayre was proud of him, but he did not like the noise of a child's crying. So it had to be kept in rooms that were a long way off, in the charge of its nurse and of Marie Vazon. And when the child was eight months old the nurse went away and he was left to Marie Vazon only. Madame did not like Marie, and that was another trouble. Mees Ford stood by the Vazons, father and daughter, while Madame hated them. *Ma foi*, I, for one, was not surprised when Madame ran away. The only wonder was she stood the life so long."

"Did you ever hear any hint that she didn't run away after all?" asked Miss Eden.

The girl looked up in real surprise.

"No, mademoiselle," she answered with the accent of sincerity.

"Do you think it possible that she never went away at all, but that she was kept shut up at the *château*."

The girl smiled incredulously.

"Oh, no; even if she was not very clever she would not have let herself be treated so. And besides, it must have been known."

Miss Eden looked at Bayre.

"Do you think it was jealousy of Miss Ford's interference, then, that drove her away?" he asked.

"It was the miserable life they all led together," replied the girl, promptly. "For Monsieur Bayre and his cousin quarrelled—they had always done so even before his marriage, and it was worse afterwards. He liked her, he respected her, but she was avaricious and mean, and so there was always a conflict between him and her as to the things he did. It was a wretched life for young Madame. She was too timid, too gentle to quarrel herself, but she had to listen to it all and to suffer for it."

"And after she left, did you ever hear anything of her again?"

"Not a word. Monsieur Bayre and his cousin behaved as if she had never existed. At least, as far as we servants knew. They quarrelled more than ever, perhaps, and we saw less of him than we had done before. And when his cousin died in an apopletic fit—during a quarrel one night, I believe—he shut himself up altogether for

a time. He was broken, aged; we were sorry for him."

Miss Eden turned to Bayre again.

"That will do, Nini," she said.

And the girl dropped them a rustic curtsey and returned to her work in the wash-house.

"She hasn't told much that I didn't know before," said Bayre, dryly.

He was offended by the bland impudence with which she denied her own action in regard to the child in the basket, and was inclined to resent the mystification in which he felt sure that Miss Eden had her share.

"Well, no doubt she's told you all she could."

"I don't think so. However, we need not discuss that." And he prepared to go. "At any rate, I'm thankful to have found you alive and well, Miss Eden."

"Thank you. You are going?"

"Yes."

"Shall I see you again?"

There was just enough of something that was not indifference in her voice, as she put the question, for Bayre to feel himself softening against his will.

"Oh, I—I don't know," he began. And then he said abruptly, "Do you wish to see me again—before I go?"

She lowered her eyelids demurely.

"Not if you think it too much trouble to come so far out of your way, Mr. Bayre."

"Oh, that's just what I do feel, of course, that it's too much trouble," said he.

Miss Eden affected to misunderstand his tone.

"I thought so. Then good-bye, Mr. Bayre."

And she put out her hand with an off-hand coolness which, although he felt convinced that it was only assumed to annoy and pique him, made him furious.

"Oh, good-bye," said he, with as little cordiality as was consistent with common decency, as he touched and dropped her offered hand and went to the door.

Miss Eden shut it after him, and he went back to St. Luke's, with just one glance behind which showed him only the closed door and no face at the window, in a state of rage and irritation of the keenest possible kind.

To think that he should have made such a fool of himself as to take this journey, at the risk of giving grievous offence by asking for a second holiday, just to see a disingenuous coquette who led him on only to deceive him. For that she knew all about the trick played upon him and his friends by Nini he felt convinced. Even her light way of passing over the subject was confirmation of that fact.

He wished he had not come. He was no nearer to the truth about the child than he had been before. While his interview with Miss Eden had only served to strengthen the impression she had previously made upon him, at the same time it for the first time raised in him doubts of her frankness.

Why did she make a mystery of the incident of the child? Did she think him incapable of

keeping a secret? or did she think that he would resent being called upon to have any share in the safe-keeping of the child who was his uncle's heir?

In spite of the fact that he had seen another child at the Vazons' cottage, Bayre still thought that the hero of the basket was his infant cousin. But in the face of Miss Eden's rather haughty silence upon this point he dared not even ask the question. He was so angry and hurt, without quite knowing why, that he told himself he should take no more trouble over the matter, but should go back to London and wait for further developments, leaving Miss Eden to get out of her own difficulties as she might, and his uncle to be dealt with by Monsieur Blaise, who would no doubt in the end make some inquiries and discover the mystery, whatever it might be, that was connected with the *château* of Creux.

He felt some self-reproach down in the bottom of his heart at the idea of leaving it to a stranger to unearth a family secret. But, after all, he told himself, it was no affair of his, and the man whom old Mr. Bayre had chosen for a sort of son-in-law had more reason for interference in the family affairs than a blood-relation who had been kept at arm's-length.

In this mood he reached St. Luke's and passed an uneasy evening. But with a bright morning came softer thoughts and feelings, so that when he took his early walk, after his roll and coffee, he instinctively went up to the New Town and

struck inland in the direction of Madame Portelet's cottage.

By the luckiest accident in the world—in spite of his stoical resolve to have no more to do with her this was how he described it to himself—he met Miss Eden before he came in sight of the humble dwelling where she had found a temporary refuge.

She blushed very prettily at sight of him and this fact gave him some secret satisfaction, to counterbalance the remembrance of her cool dismissal of the previous afternoon. But she took care to minimize the effect of this by raising her eyebrows and saying,—

"Then you haven't gone back yet, Mr. Bayre?"

"N-n-no," said he. He turned and walked in silence for a few seconds beside her. "Are you sorry, Miss Eden, that I've not gone back?"

"I'm sorry you don't seem to have enjoyed this visit as much as you did your last," she replied discreetly.

"Well, you're not as nice to me as you were last time, you know."

"I?"

"Yes. You."

He was regaining confidence a little. She was so much more coquettish than she had been on his first visit, that it suddenly dawned upon him that there might be a more flattering explanation of her conduct than the one of indifference.

"I've had a good deal to worry me since you were here before," she explained more soberly, almost humbly. "Surely you know enough to

understand that. Does a girl run away from her guardian's house, as I did, without great provocation?"

"Of course not, of course not. Forgive me if, if I seem—seem—"

"I forgive you, certainly. And I can understand the trouble you are in yourself about all this. After all, Mr. Bayre is your own uncle, and whatever concerns him, concerns the family, doesn't it?"

"Yes. I'm glad you feel that. And you won't think me intrusive if, feeling that, I feel also very much troubled about his treatment of you?"

"Oh, that's nothing. I shall be all right."

"Yes, but how? What are you going to do?"

"Well, I've written to someone, someone in England, to suggest that I should go there."

"Let me see you safely to the other side, then—"

"Oh, no, thank you. I must have time to decide if that is best. I have written, and I am waiting for her answer."

"This is some lady you know well that you think of going to?"

"No, I've never seen her," began Miss Eden, rather reluctantly.

"And you mean to trust yourself to someone you don't know?"

The tears sprang to the girl's eyes.

"I have to," said she, petulantly. "I have no near relations; you might have guessed that, since your uncle, who was only an old friend of my father's, is my only guardian."

Bayre's heart began to beat very fast.

"No friends!" said he in a low voice, which was not very steady.

Miss Eden grew nervous and confused.

"Oh, no, of course I don't mean that exactly," she said with a little laugh. "Of course I've plenty of friends in one sense. But it is only very particular friends that one cares to live with—"

"But you said you didn't even know her?" persisted Bayre, grown warm and earnest. "Why don't you go to some of the friends you do know?"

"Well," said she, desperately, "I want to be independent. If I were to stay with people older than myself I should have to fall in with their ways, to live their lives, and perhaps I shouldn't like it."

"But it would be safer for you, better for you," urged Bayre, excitedly; "a girl who knows nothing of life, or men and women!"

"Oh, but don't you think one's instincts are guide enough? I do. It's an exploded idea that girls can't take care of themselves just as well as young men."

"Oh, no, it's not," retorted Bayre, dictatorially. "Come, be advised by me. You can trust me to this extent, can't you? Let me know where this lady lives and I'll go to see her, take her a message from you, don't vou see? And I'll find out all about her."

"And supposing I were to say she lives in Lancashire, for instance?"

"I'd go just the same," said Bayre, passionately.

"Go straight there the moment I got to England."

"Would you? Would you really do that? But I don't see why you should. Why should you?"

There was just enough agitation in the girl's voice, showing that she was touched, grateful, for the young man to be thrown at once off his balance.

"Because I love you," was his straightforward answer, uttered in a low voice that thrilled her in spite of herself.

She did not shrink away, she did not answer; but she walked on beside him silently, biting her lip, and looking down. His head was still bent as he tried to look into her face, feeling that he had hazarded his all on one cast and that her next words must make or mar him for ever.

While they were both at white heat, as it were, he in the thraldom of his passion and she held by a pang of new and strange emotion, there fell upon them, like water upon a conflagration, the sound of a thick, husky man's voice—the voice of a man to whom exercise was a burden and a fatigue.

"*Hein!*" said the voice.

And at the sound the two young people shivered guiltily and stopped, turning, as they did so, to face the direction whence the sound came.

And on the other side of a low stone wall, where a clump of evergreens had hidden him from sight as they passed, they saw the portly form,

the round, red face, and the Panama hat of Monsieur Blaise.

But he was not wearing his blue goggles. He had taken these off and held them in one hand, in order that he might have a clearer and better view of the guilty couple.

CHAPTER XII

THE MEETING

Miss Eden recovered her self-possession sufficiently to hold out her hand. The angry M. Blaise took no notice of it.

"Won't you shake hands with me? What have I done?" said she.

"What have you done?" retorted the stout gentleman, frowning upon her and her companion with strict impartiality. "That, mademoiselle, is what everybody has asked for two days. It is a strange thing for a young lady to disappear from among her friends."

"I wasn't very far off," said she, humbly. "I was staying at the cottage of the grandmother of one of my guardian's old servants."

Monsieur Blaise made a slight motion with his head, which may have meant approval or disapproval, assent or dissent.

"And why, mademoiselle, did you indulge this caprice?"

Miss Eden hesitated.

"May I help to explain?" said Bayre, diffidently.

"And who are you, monsieur?" said the elder man, with some asperity.

"I am one of the nearest living relations of

Mr. Bartlett Bayre, whose namesake I am," said the young man, readily.

This information evidently surprised Monsieur Blaise, and somewhat mollified him.

"Then you are a relation of this lady's also?"

"No," said Bayre. "But as she is my uncle's ward, I naturally feel a great interest in her welfare."

When he came to this point in his speech, Bayre saw that Monsieur Blaise began to look at him askance, so he paused.

"Ah! Ah! No doubt!" said Monsieur Blaise dryly. "And she feels an interest in you, and confides to you only the secret of her hiding-place."

Both the young people protested in a breath, so volubly, and with so much detail, that they managed to convince the elderly gentleman that Bayre's discovery of the lady had been an accidental one.

"And why did you go away?" Miss Eden hesitated. "Why, if you wanted to go away, did you not at least let *me* know where you were?"

"The fact is, Monsieur Blaise," broke in Bayre, "that my uncle's conduct has been very eccentric lately, and that Miss Eden got frightened. But she doesn't like to admit the fact."

The manner of Monsieur Blaise changed and grew expansive in a moment.

"Ah, ah!" cried he, opening his small blue eyes very wide, so that they looked like two glass marbles in an undulating field of pink. "Now I

begin to perceive! Eccentric! *Mon Dieu*, I am with you there. Our friend is eccentric beyond all experience!" He turned quickly to the girl. "Did he alarm you then, mademoiselle, by his eccentricity? What is it that he has done?"

Again she hesitated, and again Bayre spoke for her.

"My uncle showed no violence to her," he said, "and I think it a pity she ever came away."

Monsieur Blaise assented vehemently, with so many noddings of his head, that he looked like one of those toy figures whose loose heads swing in an open neck.

"Pity! Yes, yes, it is a pity," he assented. "If you were afraid, Miss Eden, you should have consulted me. A word to your future husband—"

Miss Eden laughed a little and interrupted him.

"Oh, surely, Monsieur Blaise, you can't want to marry me still? I am too erratic for you, you know."

"Erratic, yes, so you are," agreed the stout gentleman with deliberation. "But *enfin*, it must be that one's wife have some defects! And if one knows them beforehand, one is prepared."

Miss Eden grew pale with consternation.

"But," she began in a faint voice.

Before she could get any further, Monsieur interrupted her briskly, and indicating Bayre with a wave of the hand, said, with elaborate courtesy,—

"Ah! Is it that you wish to marry this gentleman?—this nephew of your guardian?"

The blood rushed into her pale face as she drew herself up.

"Oh, dear, no. I never thought of such a thing!" she cried emphatically.

Bayre drew himself up too, and Monsieur Blaise smiled so expansively that the flesh of his large round face rolled up into a succession of shiny pink ridges.

"It is well, it is well," he said, "but we should be grateful for his excellent suggestion. I agree with him that you should go back to your guardian's house, and this gentleman and I will discuss the matter of his kinsman's eccentricity, which is undoubted. In the meantime you need have no cause for alarm while you have two friends near at hand. You are staying at Guernsey, monsieur?"

"For a few days only. I propose to go over to Creux, and to put up at the house of the boatman who lives by the landing-place. He lets lodgings, I know."

"A good idea!" assented Monsieur Blaise. "In the meantime I should like to have a few further words with you upon this matter, when we have seen this young lady safe on her return journey."

Miss Eden was taken aback by this sudden settling of her destinies, but she submitted, and returned at once to Madame Portelet's cottage, to prepare her hostess for her departure. Monsieur Blaise took Bayre confidentially by the arm, and walking with him some distance, talking eagerly and panting as he talked.

"My dear young friend," he said earnestly, "I

am glad you came here. I have had certain doubts, certain very odd suspicions, I may now confess, about our friend at Creux. With a member of his family who shares my opinion that something is wrong there, I am bold, I am fearless. We will go together, you and I, to the *château*, we will meet your uncle face to face, side by side." And he waved his arm in the manner of one who storms a fortress sword in hand. "And we will solve our doubts without delay."

Bayre caught at this suggestion, which was as opportune for him as for the other. With Monsieur Blaise he would no doubt be admitted to his uncle's presence, and perhaps he would learn more in a single interview than he would have been able to do in six months of inquiry.

"You have definite suspicions?" asked he.

Monsieur Blaise gave one of his large nods.

"Do you think he is mad?"

"I will say nothing," said the stout gentleman, "until I am more sure of what I think. In the meantime let us make an appointment. Shall we meet at the harbor this afternoon and cross together in time to reach the *château* about four?"

"Just as you please."

"It is agreed then," said Monsieur Blaise, who for the most part spoke excellent English, dropping into the French idiom only when he was strongly excited. "Be at the harbor at half-past two and we will settle this matter without delay."

The appointment made, perhaps Monsieur Blaise forgot all about Miss Eden, for he at once took

leave of the younger man and returned to his own house.

Bayre lingered in the neighborhood, hoping for another *tête-à-tête* with Miss Eden.

He had not to wait long. She came back from the cottage at a brisk pace, with Nini to carry her travelling-bag. She blushed and would have passed him with a smile and a few words of casual greeting, but he would not allow that.

"Send the girl on," said he, peremptorily, in a low voice.

After a moment's hesitation Miss Eden obeyed.

"Now," said he, with a certain imperiousness which surprised himself, "tell me what you meant by being so indignant when old Blaise asked if you wanted to marry me?"

The girl's eyes sparkled, and she held her head high. He was right, however, in thinking that there was something not discouraging in their expression.

"Well, I don't want to marry you," replied she, blandly.

"Wouldn't you rather do that than marry him? Now, tell the truth."

"I don't know what you mean, Mr. Bayre, by putting on these stand-and-deliver airs with me. This morning you were quite meek by comparison."

"Well, you put my back up by the lofty tone in which you told that old fellow that you didn't want to marry me!" said Bayre, looking down into her face with assurance that surprised himself, as he noted that she was considerably agitated,

although she held fast to a light and careless tone.

"Well, I didn't mean to be rude, but what could I say? Would you have had me tell him that I *did* want to marry you?"

And at last, for a swift instant, she let her bright eyes glance towards his face.

"Yes, that's just what I would have had you say! At least, perhaps it would have been uncomfortable to say it to him, but I wish to Heaven you'd say it to *me*."

Miss Eden shook her head gently.

"That's not the sort of thing one does in a hurry," she said. "I don't know much about you, Mr. Bayre."

"You know a great deal more about me than you do about that amiable pink elephant your guardian chose for you. Yet you were ready, or half ready, to marry him even before you had seen him."

"Ah, well, that was a different thing. That would have been a marriage of arrangement, in the French fashion, while the other—"

She checked herself, but it was too late. Bayre beamed all over his pale face as he made her stop, and whispered eagerly,—

"Say it, yes, say it. The other—would have been a marriage of inclination?"

But she would not answer him.

"Look, Nini's dropping my bag!" she suddenly cried.

And with an adroit movement she ran past her companion, and waving him a farewell with her

hand, reached Nini's side and went on without looking back again.

Bayre, however, was not disheartened. He could hardly expect to carry off the prize so early in the fight, but there was something in Miss Eden's manner this morning which bade him hope. Without being vain he felt that he ought to have a fair chance against the pink elephant.

Monsieur Blaise, however, was quite as fully convinced that Miss Eden was to be his as Bayre was that she inclined to himself. And as the middle-aged suitor and the young one crossed the rough channel between Guernsey and Creux together, Monsieur Blaise entertained Bayre, until he fell sea-sick, with accounts of the changes he contemplated making in his house-appointments in view of his approaching plunge into late matrimony.

The sea was calmer than it had been on the previous day, but the wind had not yet gone down altogether. The sky was grey with clouds, and the sea-birds were whirling wildly round the black rocks about the little island, as the boat was carried on the crest of a wave into the shelter of the little landing-place.

It was a matter of great difficulty to land Monsieur Blaise neatly, for he was demoralized by sea-sickness, and was by no means agile at the best of times.

Once on shore, however, excitement gave him speed, and although he panted a great deal, he managed to keep up a good pace as he and his

companion walked together to the house of old Bartlett Bayre.

As he had anticipated, Marie Vazon, who opened the door to them, did not dare refuse admittance to the younger man when he was accompanied by so important a person as Monsieur Blaise. She was, however, in a state of considerable agitation as, after a moment's hesitation, she turned abruptly and led the way into a little *salon*, where she left them, to announce their arrival to her master.

It was a commonplace room this, with the usual polished floor and simple furniture of a French country house; and it was not until, after the lapse of some minutes, Marie Vazon returned and led them through a long apartment, splendid with pictures, with Louis Quinze furniture, and with Sèvres china in priceless cabinets, that Bayre got his first idea of the treasures shut up in the old country house.

From this room they were shown into a smaller one, handsomely carpeted and luxurious in glory of embroidered curtains and deep, square, carved armchairs, upholstered in damask of rich hues and surmounted by imperial eagles in ormolu.

Here, with his back to the light, crouching in skull-cap and dressing-gown over the wood fire, was the lean and shrunken figure of old Bartlett Bayre, spectacles on nose, and the eternal pipe in his mouth.

He looked up when they entered, and invited them to be seated, not in words, but by a half-sulky movement of the head.

Bayre sat at a little distance, but Monsieur Blaise, more bold, drew a chair to the side of the old recluse.

"You have been suffering, my friend," said he.

"Not more than usual. I am getting old, old and broken," answered Mr. Bayre, fretfully, with a glance at his unwelcome nephew. "There are plenty of folk who rejoice in that fact, doubtless," he added grimly.

Bartlett reddened, but said nothing.

"Ah, well, we must not worry ourselves upon those points," said Monsieur Blaise, cheerfully. "We have come to congratulate you on having found your niece. She has returned, has she not?"

"Um, I believe so," replied Mr. Bayre, without enthusiasm. "Was it your doing, her going away?"

"I! What a question! No. I told her to come back, and I have come to suggest some final arrangements regarding her marriage with me."

"Ah!"

As he spoke Monsieur Blaise had gradually drawn his chair nearer and nearer, and young Bayre, watching him intently, was surprised to see a sudden change which came over his fat face when he was close to the old man.

As for the recluse, he kept his eyes on the floor, or on the points of his own slippers, so that he noted nothing of this close scrutiny, of this change of expression on his visitor's face.

All at once, without the slightest warning, Monsieur Blaise stood up. Bayre still watching

him, thought that he was going to denounce his host where he stood. But instead of that, Monsieur Blaise said abruptly, after drawing one of those stertorous breaths which the slightest exertion evoked from him,—

"Well, I will not trouble you now. I—I will come again when you are better. Till then, *au revoir, au revoir.*"

Old Mr. Bayre looked up in surprise. His visitor was already at the door, and the younger man, agitated and curious, was by this time on his feet.

"You will have some coffee with me," said the host, placing his hand upon a spring-bell on a table beside him.

"No, no, my friend, another time, another time."

Monsieur Blaise was already out of the room, and as old Mr. Bayre at once turned away and looked at the fire with no more interest in the visitors, his nephew, with a formal bow of which his host took no notice, followed his companion out of the room.

They passed through the handsome outer saloon, and the smaller one, and found Marie Vazon waiting in the hall. The girl looked from the one face to the other with sly eyes, but Monsieur Blaise said nothing until he and the younger man were out of the house.

Half-way down the avenue he drew a long breath, took off his hat, and wiped his bald forehead with a large colored silk handkerchief. His face was pale, almost haggard, and his eyes still had the same scared expression as before.

"*Mon Dieu!*" cried he, "I have had such a shock! I have made such a discovery!"

"Well, what it is? what is it?" cried Bayre, in a fever.

But the older man drew in his lips, recovered himself, and shook his head.

"I am no spy upon my neighbors," said he. "I would not bring disgrace upon them, no, no matter what they had done. But—I would not marry into that family—for fifty thousand pounds!"

CHAPTER XIII

PRUDENCE *v.* PASSION

BAYRE stared at Monsieur Blaise as he stood shivering and wiping his face with a trembling hand under the bare trees of the avenue. That he was suffering from severe excitement was evident. All the pink color had left his face; his eyes looked dull and glassy. If he had seen a ghost, or if he had been witness of some frightful crime, he could not have looked less like the comfortable, placid Monsieur Blaise of every day.

"Surely," said the young man, persuasively, "you can have no scruples about confiding your discovery to me. Remember I am a member of his family; I am his nephew. I am therefore the last person who could or would help to bring disgrace upon the house."

But Monsieur Blaise shook his head with decision.

"You say you are his nephew? Well, I don't doubt it, I never have doubted it since you told me so, but Monsieur Bayre did not receive you as a relation; he did not even speak to you. *Hein!*"

This was undeniable. Bayre was silent.

"If you belong to his family," went on Monsieur Blaise, after a short pause, during which he had

put on his hat and resumed his walk down the avenue, "it is for you to make inquiries, to consult your lawyers, if you choose. But it is not for me to interfere in the matter, neither is it for me to discuss it. We will, if you please, converse upon some other topic."

But Bayre was not to be put off like this.

"Surely," he said, "you have told me too much, or not enough. You have confessed that you received a great shock while sitting with me in my uncle's presence; how can it, then, be indiscreet to admit what discovery it was that affected you so much?"

"I may have been mistaken," said Monsieur Blaise, beginning to recover his normal color, and turning his small eyes cunningly towards his companion, as if to find out how much he had betrayed. "I was excited, nervous. We had talked ourselves, you and I, into a sort of feverish, suspicious state, in which trifles seemed to become mountains. What I saw was nothing; well, what I fancied may have been nothing too."

Bayre tried to recall every smallest fact connected with their short visit. His uncle had sat between the fire place and a high window; behind him and his table, Bayre remembered that there had hung a curtain, or piece of tapestry, which fell in deep folds. The corner was a dark one; his own attention had been riveted upon his uncle and Monsieur Blaise. It was quite possible that some person might have peeped out from behind the hangings during that short interview, and that

Monsieur Blaise might have seen and recognized the face of the intruder.

"Did you see, or fancy you saw, anyone in the room besides our three selves?" he asked abruptly.

By the sudden access of agitation in his companion Bayre saw that his guess was a good one.

"What do you mean? I saw nothing, nobody, no, of course not," he stammered out incoherently. "It is like that, monsieur, I do not see nothing nor nobody. And I will not be interrogated as if by a judge of instruction. If you have the desire of making inquiries you will do so without my assistance. I have seen nothing and I will say nothing."

And he made as if to button up his own mouth by pressing the large, loose lips together until they looked like a long white seam.

They had reached the open road, and were about to turn to the right, in the direction of the landing-place, when they heard certain sounds behind them which made them look guiltily, anxiously, at each other.

A girl's voice that spoke in a sort of sigh, a girl's light footsteps on the hard road. That was all. It was with a guilty look that they met Miss Eden when she called to them to stop. She had followed them from the *château*, her hat held on with one hand and no sort of wrap round her shoulders. She was out of breath, and her eyes were full of distress and anxiety.

Monsieur Blaise raised his hat in silence and

would have pushed on without further greeting. But she stood in front of them, with determination in her set face.

"Monsieur Blaise, Mr. Bayre!" cried she, passionately, "you shall not pass me without speaking. I demand to know why you came and why you went away so quickly. What have you learned? What have you found out?"

It maddened Bayre to hear the cold and cutting tone in which his companion replied to the unhappy girl.

"Found out, mademoiselle! Found out! I do not understand. We have found nothing out. Is there anything to find?"

She brushed aside these incoherent evasions with an impatient gesture.

"What nonsense!" she cried passionately. "Do you forget that you discussed my guardian's eccentricity this very morning, and in my presence?"

Monsieur Blaise looked uncomfortable.

"We may have done," he said vaguely. "I do not remember. We are all eccentric more or less."

"Why did you come to see him?"

"Why? Why? I—I—we go to see him, to—to—*ma foi*, mademoiselle, since you have developed eccentricities yourself, since you have the habit of to disappear from your guardian's house without to inform your friends, I go to your guardian for to formally renounce my pretensions to your hand."

Bayre was furious at the coolly insolent manner in which Monsieur Blaise made this false statement. But Miss Eden, without allowing him to interfere, went on quietly, her temper quite unruffled,—

"Indeed? You might have withdrawn them this morning when you met me. But then you were not in that mind."

"Mademoiselle! You accuse me of—"

"Oh, no, no, I accuse you of nothing. But I appeal to you to tell me why you left the house so quickly. I know from Marie Vazon—"

"Ah! What?"

Both Monsieur Blaise and Bayre awaited her answer eagerly.

"Only this, that your abrupt departure has thrown her into a state of the greatest alarm. I found her in the hall, sobbing and screaming, and rocking herself to and fro. Of course she wouldn't tell me anything, so I've come after you to beg you to relieve my anxiety. Mr. Bayre, surely *you* will speak out!"

"Do you think I wouldn't if I could?" said Bayre, speaking with as much passion as she had shown herself. "I've come away because Monsieur Blaise came away. I know nothing. I'm just as much in the dark as yourself."

She looked incredulously up into his face.

"I shouldn't have thought you capable of deceiving me, certainly," said she, "in a matter so

important to me. If my guardian were mad, as you seemed to think, you couldn't, in mercy, keep such a terrible secret to yourself, for my sake. And if—if it were anything else, why, surely you would give me some idea of what was hanging over us, wouldn't you? If you knew the frightful state of anxiety in which I'm living!"

And her voice suddenly broke and she burst into tears.

Bayre lost his head.

"My darling, my darling, don't! If you knew what I feel for you, you'd never believe I could deceive you," cried he, only conscious of her, and not even aware of the fact that poor Monsieur Blaise, brought thus inopportunely face to face with the girl he wished to jilt, had slipped away and was puffing and panting along towards the shore where the boat was waiting.

Miss Eden sobbed on.

"Don't, don't," whispered Bayre, putting his hand upon the girl's shoulder with diffident tenderness. "Listen. I don't know anything; *you* know more than I do. I can only guess what it was that that miserable old panting rhinoceros" —he had by this time discovered the escape of his ponderous companion—"saw in your guardian's room."

And he related the events of their short visit, and told how obstinately Monsieur Blaise had refused to confess what it was that frightened him.

Miss Eden did not look up, but she presently spoke from under the handkerchief which she was pressing to her eyes. Bayre's hand was still hovering near the shoulder; he was still bending over her in a coaxing attitude.

"Do you think he's mad?" she asked.

"He gave no sign of insanity just now. It was old Blaise and I who behaved like lunatics, running away within a few seconds of being introduced into the room, and flying from the house as if we'd been thieves with the police at our heels!"

Miss Eden dried her eyes and looked up.

"Yes," said she. "And I behaved more like a lunatic than he, too. For when I came back here two hours ago I went into the *salle à manger* and found him there, and it was *I* who stammered and spoke brokenly and in confusion. He watched me quietly, and asked me where I had learned such erratic habits, and whether I expected a husband to put up with them when I married."

"Did he say that?"

"Yes, quite quietly, and not as if he cared much whether I went away or not. He asked me where I'd been, and I told him. But he didn't ask me why I went away, or why I came back again. He didn't seem to care."

"Did he say anything about me?"

"Ye-es."

And then she hesitated.

"Something not very complimentary?"

"He said that his young fool of a nephew had been 'sniffing about' the *château*, and, and—"

"Well?"

"He said after all you ought to be welcome to look at the outside of his house as you'd never be a penny the better for what was inside."

"Well, I've never expected to be," retorted Bayre. "I suppose he'll find out that I've been talking to you, and he'll be angry with you for that."

"I don't care."

"But I do. Look here. Let me go to him boldly and tell him I want to take you away."

"Oh, no!"

She tried to run away from him. But Bayre caught her by the wrist and held her, and finding that she was shivering, took off his own overcoat, and insisted, although she struggled and protested, on wrapping her in it.

"Now," said he, coolly, though the coolness did not extend to his eyes. "you can't run away without robbing me of my property. I'll let you go in five minutes, but you must be good and listen to me first. You say you are miserable here—"

"Only lately. It's all changed suddenly," said she in a piteous tone.

"Well, you *are* miserable, and now that you know there's something wrong, and that you've thrown over old Blaise—"

"I didn't. He's thrown me over!"

"Well, well, you may congratulate yourself anyhow, I think. For though I may not be a

great match, I'm a little more presentable than he is."

"What you are has nothing to do with it."

"Oh, but it has, though. Look here, Miss Eden. By-the-bye, haven't you got a Christian name?"

She hesitated again for a moment, and then said, in a low voice,—

"Olwen."

Perhaps it was the fact that she was wearing his overcoat which gave him a sort of proprietary feeling. At any rate it was with the simplest straightforwardness that he proceeded, having learned her Christian name, to call her by it.

"Look here, Olwen, I'm not a rich man; I've not even begun to be a successful one. Perhaps I never shall be anything but a struggling man all my life. I tell you so frankly. Perhaps, I say. But I do feel something in me which tells me that if I had the woman I want to struggle for I should be so strong, so dogged, that I should make my way in the long run; I should live for her, I should fight for her, ah! and in the long run I should grow rich for her."

"I don't want to be rich," remarked Miss Eden plaintively, from under the overcoat.

"Well, then, I could remain poor for her, which would be easier still. Come, come, don't you think I'd try to make you happy?"

"I—I don't think my guardian would say so?"

Bayre laughed.

"Would you ask him then?"

"I should have to. You forget or you don't understand. Although he hasn't been very affectionate to me since I've been here—since his own troubles, that is to say—Mr. Bayre has been a good and kind friend to me ever since my own father's death. It is he who has paid for my education, too, so that the little my father left should be allowed to accumulate for me. Now you see why I feel an obligation to consult his wishes as far as possible, and why I feel that I did wrong in running away as I did."

"Well, you had reason to be alarmed. You have reason still. It's not safe for you to be in the same house with a madman."

"You don't know that he's mad! I don't know it!"

"Well, there's something wrong about him, something that makes me very unwilling to leave you under the same roof with him. Yet it's a delicate business too. For, after all, he's my own relation; and even old Blaise felt a reluctance about speaking out in the case of a neighbor and friend."

The two looked gravely into each other's face.

"It's full of difficulties," she said with a sigh. "I feel that I'm pulled first in one direction and then in the other. Though I've never been able to be fond of my guardian, I feel I owe a duty to him. And believe me, I should never have run away, as you call it, if I hadn't been seized with a sort of terror of what was going on, and felt that

I must have time to think—to think by myself. And now, what has my thinking brought me to? Nowhere. I've had to come back in a sort of disgrace, and I feel that he looks upon me as a traitor."

Bayre looked uneasy.

"If even one could trust the servants it wouldn't be so bad," said he. "But I loathe those Vazons, and the two other women about the place don't look very intelligent."

"They're both in terror of my guardian, and abjectly servile to Marie Vazon," explained Miss Eden.

"I wonder if they know anything?"

"If they do, they won't own it. You don't understand these cunning peasants as well as I do. As long as they get a living here they'll be content to know nothing, to see nothing, but what they are told to hear and to see. Now, let me give you back your coat. I'm going back to the *château*."

She had assumed a very precise, matter-of-fact manner, which Bayre had to accept as a sign that all sentimental subjects were to be shelved for the present. He submitted in silence to take his coat. Then she held out her hand.

"When are you going back?"

"I don't know yet. In the meantime, I'm staying at the house by the landing-place."

The look of joy that flashed over her face showed him how much relieved she was to find that a friend upon whom she could rely was to be so near.

But she would not give him time to profit by this discovery. With one quick, shy, blushing glance at him she fled away in the direction of the *château*, leaving him strangely excited, and yet comforted, too.

CHAPTER XIV

TAKE THE BULL BY THE HORNS

BAYRE went straight back to the landing-place, where, as he had expected, he found that Monsieur Blaise had pushed off without him and was now some distance on his way back to Guernsey. He could even see the recumbent figure of the fickle lover in the stern of the boat; for Monsieur would not undertake the management of the tiller, but left the business of the boat to the two men, and displayed the better part of valor by lying with his head upon the seat and his eyes closed, subduing qualms, both physical and mental, with what success he could.

Bayre found lodgings, as he had proposed, at the little house of a man who lived close to the landing-place, who made money in the summer by bringing visitors to Creux, and filled up his time in the winter and autumn by fishing.

The young man had only a few day's leave from his duties in town, and was doubtful as to whether he should be able to get an extension, which indeed he scarely dared to ask for. But he could not tear himself away from the islands without some clearer knowledge than he yet possessed on the subject of the mystery which surrounded his

uncle, on account of the effect it might have upon Olwen Eden.

So deeply intent was he upon the solution of this uncanny mystery, so entirely absorbed by his thoughts of the girl, that when he crossed to St. Luke's that evening, and found a letter at Madame Nicolas' house from Jan Repton, he felt a pang of guilt on discovering that he had almost entirely neglected the mission on which he was supposed to have come.

Repton's letter ran thus:—

"Dear B.,—Southerley's going to punch your head for you when you get back, and I think you jolly well deserve it. Here have we been waiting for the wire you promised to send as soon as you found out who it was that landed us with this brat; and I'm ready to bet you've forgotten all about us, and it and everything but your own affairs!

"I hate a fellow who can't think of anything else when he's got a love-affair on hand! Why, I can manage half a dozen at a time, and never miss an appointment or forget to post a letter!

"I don't say Southerley isn't as bad as you. And there's another thing. He's got it into his head that this Miss Merriman is moping because you're away; so if you get off with a whole bone in your body when he's done with you, you may think yourself lucky. And I jolly well hope you won't, for I know very well it was you got us into this mess, and here you've left us to bear the brunt of it, and the chaff and the rest of it! The

way that minx Susan grins and cheeks us now is intolerable. And she has the impudence to run up when there's a Punch and Judy show in the street to ask if we would like her to tell the man to give a show 'to please the baby!'

"And there's some idiot who's got a room on the top floor, who will sit with his door open singing some doggerel about 'Molly and I and the baby!' at the top of his voice as soon as he hears us on the stairs.

"Southerley pretends he doesn't care, and I don't suppose he would care as long as he had an excuse to go down and talk to Miss Merriman under pretence of seeing the brat—'the co-operative kid' as he calls it. But Miss Merriman seems to be getting rather anxious at our not hearing from you, so I suppose she's getting tired of the bother of the animal, and no wonder!

"What we're going to do with it when she refuses to look after it any longer I don't know. But unless I get a wire from you within forty-eight hours, I shall take it to the workhouse myself in a brown-paper parcel and give your name with it. So look out! Yours till the breaking of heads,

"JAN R."

Bayre did not quite place implicit confidence in Jan's veracity, or pay too much heed to his dark threats. But he thought it best to send a telegram of a reassuring but vague character, and then he reflected that he had really better be pushing his inquiries in the direction Jan desired.

So on the following morning he went to the

house of the Vazons, and getting inside by a ruse, with a boy who was delivering logs for fuel, he found himself in the presence not only of Marie Vazon of the sly eyes, but of the baby.

And having perhaps become both more suspicious, more observant, and more experienced of late in the matter of infants, he had no difficulty in coming to the conclusion that the baby in the cradle was not his cousin, but was a peasant's child of an age more tender than that of the hero of their adventure.

He jumped at once to the conclusion that Marie was passing this child off as old Monsieur Bayre's for the sake of the payment she got from him. It was strange that a father could be thus deceived, he thought; but old Mr. Bayre was not an ordinary man, so that it was perhaps too much to expect that he should be an ordinary father.

"What has become of Monsieur Bayre's child?" he asked the girl point-blank, seeing at once, by the guilty look in her eyes, that she knew she was found out.

"This is M. Bayre's son, monsieur," said she, promptly.

"Oh, no, it's not. I don't suppose this child is more than ten or twelve months old," hazarded he, making a guess which was still over the mark. "And this child's hair is red, what there is of it, while Mr. Bayre's son has hair almost flaxen."

The girl frowned sulkily, and her eyes shifted uneasily from his face to the child's and back again.

"It's no business of yours, at any rate," she said defiantly, at last.

"Oh, yes, it is. You are being paid to look after one child, and you seem unable or unwilling to tell what you've done with it, and you try to pass off a much younger one for that given into your care. Such a matter is everybody's business, and mine especially, as I am a member of Monsieur Bayre's family."

"You'd better complain to Monsieur Bayre, then," said Marie, sullenly.

"That's just what I'm going to do."

The girl looked scared for a moment; then she shrugged her shoulders.

"Go then, tell him, and see what thanks you get," said she, insolently. "Go, I say, if you dare."

And she shot a steely glance at him out of her blue eyes.

Defiant as her manner was, Bayre detected in the girl's face an even greater uneasiness than he would have expected, considering the hold the Vazons, father and daughter, appeared to have over their nominal master. He pondered this fact as he left the cottage, and determined to carry out his threat at once.

This he found to be impracticable, however, for on presenting himself at the *château* he found himself confronted by Pierre Vazon himself, who surlily refused him admittance, saying that Monsieur Bayre had given strict orders that he was not to enter the house.

Thus denied, Bayre considered himself justified

in further attempts to obtain information by outside means, and after passing an uneasy day on the island, without one glimpse either of Olwen or of his uncle, he returned to the neighborhood of the *château* after dark, in the hope that when lighting up time came he might be able to make more discoveries.

The great house looked desolate indeed with only a room lighted here and there, and with whole suites in darkness. The great hall with the long row of high windows, in which he had seen the groping figure which he believed to have been that of his uncle tearing up the floor-boards, had no light glimmering behind the dusky panes.

The room in which Bayre and Monsieur Blaise had been received, and the two apartments through which they had passed on their way thither, were equally in darkness.

But at the corner of the mansion, where the strings of dead Virginia creeper hung over the two narrow barred windows high up in the wall, there was a moving light behind the closed shutters.

Bayre's attention was instantly attracted. This was the room, this closed room at the end of the house, on the first floor, at the window of which Olwen had seen, or fancied she saw, a woman's hand thrust out.

Was it a woman who was moving about inside now? It was only the flickering of the light above and between the cracks of the shutters which betrayed the presence of something human within. But slight as the indication was, it was

unmistakable, and Bayre felt that he could not rest until he should have discovered whether some one was really imprisoned there.

He stood back on the broad path and calculated his chances of reaching these windows as he had done those of the great hall.

But the walls here were of brick, offering no foothold, and the creeper did not appear to be strong enough to bear his weight.

While he was considering what action to take next, the flickering light became stationary, and remained so for some minutes.

Stepping further back to get a better look at the barred and shuttered windows, and at the narrow slit of light above them, Bayre presently perceived a faint glimmer appearing in like manner above the shutters of the French windows on his right. By the flickering he could see that while the light above the higher windows was still, that behind the French windows was being carried about.

He crossed the path and came close to the glass, listening. For there were certain sounds to be made out, as of the pushing about of heavy furniture, with an occasional succession of short, sharp raps, as of some person knocking for admittance at a closed door.

Bayre took out his pocket-knife and tried to slip the catch of the window nearest to him. After a few attempts, during which the sounds within became louder, he succeeded; but the slight noise he made over this coincided with a sudden cessation of the sounds within.

There was a rapid step across the floor, and he heard someone breathing heavily on the other side of the still closed shutters. Then the footsteps retreated quickly, and Bayre stood listening, shaking the shutters gently, preparatory to making an attempt to burst them open.

That he was on the track of the mystery at last he felt certain. These strange nocturnal sounds, this haunting of the house by a being who was declared by Olwen to be a woman, would be satisfactorily explained if only he could effect an entrance now while the disturbance was in full swing.

So thought Bayre, and after only a few seconds' pause he stepped back, with the intention of dealing such a blow upon the shutters as would probably force them open.

But before he could do this he heard a click and the fall of the iron bar with a clanking sound against the wood, and the next moment the shutters flew back and his uncle, with a small lantern in his right hand, stood face to face with him.

Bayre was startled, and an exclamation broke from his lips; for he had never seen on any human face such an expression of rage and defiance, proud, menacing, savage, as now distorted the rugged features, the light eyes, wrinkled cheeks and long hatchet chin of old Bartlett Bayre.

His voice was hoarse and broken with passion as he cried,—

"I thought so. I thought so. You rascal, you thief! It is you who play the spy upon me, who

haunt my house and listen at my doors, you, you, you."

And as he spoke the old man shuffled out upon the path, lantern in hand, and shook his clenched fist in the young man's face, panting and husky with rage.

Bayre was taken aback. This was an unexpected turn of events, but one which he felt he ought to have been prepared for. As it was, the angry old man certainly appeared to have right on his side as he stood, his face still convulsed with rage, in front of the man who had thus been caught in an attempt at burglarious entry into his premises.

Bayre saw at once that this loose dark dressing-gown, tied round the waist by a frayed cord, was the very garment in which he had seen his uncle groping on the floor of the great hall on the first day of his investigations; the old man shivered as he stood, slippered and hatless, with his lank and sparse grey locks ruffled by the night wind, clutching at the sides of his collar and holding them together against his lean throat.

"What do you want here? What do you want?" croaked out he, after a pause of a few moments, during which his nephew reflected upon the answer he should give to his accuser.

"I want," cried young Bayre, boldly, suddenly resolving on the bold course of telling the whole truth without disguise, "to know who the woman is that you have shut up in your house."

To his surprise, the whole demeanor of the old man changed at once. The convulsive twitchings

of his features gave place to a sudden calmness, while he peered into the face of the younger man with a sly intentness which prepared the other for the fact that he had a crafty antagonist to deal with.

Coming quite close to young Bayre, and staring up into his face with the lantern held high enough for them to see clearly into each other's eyes, he croaked out, in a jeering voice,—

"What's that to you?"

Young Bayre was thunderstruck. He was prepared for denial, for indignation, for a torrent of abuse. But this cynical speech, which he took for an avowal, struck him dumb. The old man saw his advantage, and went quietly on, in the same aggressive, jibing tone,—

"What business is it of yours if I keep half a dozen women shut up in my house, eh? Are you the master of my house, or the head of my family, that you should interfere with me? If you've found a mare's nest, my friend, don't come here straining your precious eyes by looking through brick walls and wooden doors, but go to the police, go, go, go." And with each insulting repetition of the word the old man thrust a skinny finger into his face. "And lay information against me, me, *me*, master of Creux and benefactor to my neighbors! Say that you, a stranger, a distant relation of the man whose property you covet—"

"I do not covet your property. I've never asked you for a shilling!" cried Bayre, hotly.

"No, because you knew very well you would

never get it if you did," retorted the old man, grimly. "Tell the police, I say, that you, a penniless adventurer—"

"I'm no adventurer."

"A penniless adventurer," repeated old Mr. Bayre, his voice going up into a squeak of rage, "have a notion that there's a woman concealed in my house! See what they'll say to you, you pitiful sneak and spy! See what honor and credit you will win for yourself by trying to foul your own nest, to bring disgrace upon the head of your own family!"

Again young Bayre was for the moment dumb; the passion which possessed the old man, the torrent of wounded pride which gushed forth in his speech and glowed in his sunken eyes, impressed his nephew with a sort of respect and remorse, and he began to wonder whether he had not taken fancies, both his own and those of others, for facts too readily.

But even as he began to hunt for suitable words in which to make a sort of apology, there passed suddenly over the withered old face below him an expression of cunning and malice combined which revived all his suspicions and made him stand to his guns.

"If I've played the spy, sir," he said boldly, "you've brought my action upon yourself by your own outrageous behavior. If a sane man will behave like an insane one, if he will surround himself with dubious people and behave in a suspicious way, he has no one to blame but himself if a stranger to the place comes to the conclusion that

there's something about his way of life that wants inquiring into."

Again the old man appeared to be impressed by his words, and for a moment he remained silent, holding his lantern hanging by his side, and pulling the sides of his dressing-gown yet more closely over his throat.

Then he spoke again, not angrily, not loudly, but with a keen suspicion in his tones.

"Who told you about this woman?" he asked abruptly.

The young man hesitated. He did not wish to implicate Olwen; yet what could he say?

He pointed suddenly to the barred windows above their heads.

"Who is in that room?" he asked sharply.

The old man turned and looked up. There was just a second's pause. Then he turned again, so abruptly that the lantern nearly swung out of his hand.

"Come and see," said he in a low voice.

And beckoning his nephew to follow him, he stepped into the house through the open doors of the French window, and setting down his lantern on the polished floor, barred the shutters behind them without another word.

CHAPTER XV

THE HOSPITALITY OF MR. BAYRE

It was an apartment which he had not yet seen in which young Bartlett now found himself shut in with his elder namesake. More like one of the galleries of a museum than a room in a private house, this saloon with its panelled walls of white and gold, its pillars and its painted ceiling, was bare in the centre, but lined all along the sides with cabinets and show-cases, full of treasures of all kinds.

The most casual glance at the contents of these cases showed to the least experienced eye that the collection was one of great value. Exquisite specimens of rare porcelain, beautiful enamels, ancient jewels of all countries, weapons of great price, treasures of lace and of embroidery, all were represented here.

Bayre was attracted, in spite of his eagerness to solve the mystery surrounding his uncle, by what he saw. He was just enough of a connoisseur to appreciate and to wish to examine more closely the rare and costly objects around him; and even as his uncle occupied himself in replacing the heavy iron bar across the shutters, he drew near to the first cabinet on the left hand and

peered with interest and curiosity at the carved ivories within.

The light was very bad, being supplied solely by the lantern which old Mr. Bayre carried with him and had now placed on the floor, but the young man made out enough to prove that report had not exaggerated the beauty and the value of the collection.

As he looked the light grew a little better, and he found old Mr. Bayre standing by his side, holding the lantern aloft. The young man was for the moment under the impression that his uncle, softened a little by the interest the treasures excited in his visitor, was courteously enabling him to see them more distinctly.

He turned, pointing with one hand to one of those fantastic jewels which mediæval art loved to devise out of huge mis-shapen pearls, when, coming thus suddenly face to face with the owner of the treasures, he was surprised to find that the light was held, not for him to inspect the jewels, but for their owner to inspect him.

And again young Bayre asked himself whether this lined, haggard, crafty old countenance, with its furrows and the lurking malignity in its half-closed eyes, was that of a sane man or of one who was the victim of mania.

Old Mr. Bayre seemed to understand that he had in some measure betrayed himself by the expression of his own countenance, for he tried to laugh away the look of sudden consternation which he saw on his nephew's face. Showing the gaps between his yellow teeth in a mirthless

opening of the mouth which was meant for a genial laugh, he said, in a more conciliatory tone than he had yet used,—

"Some nice things there, eh? Good things, uncommon things? Do you know much about objects of that sort?"

"Not perhaps more than the average Londoner is bound to know through the museums and collections he's visited," said the young man, "but enough to know that you have something to be proud of here."

The old man laughed again, cunningly, as if with some secret enjoyment.

"Worth some thousands of pounds, pictures and furniture and what you see," he said, waving his hand in the direction of the rest of the cabinets.

"Yes," said young Bayre, shortly.

He was surprised and disappointed to hear in the old man's tone something more like the pride of a tradesman at the market value of the goods around him than the tender enthusiasm of the real connoisseur.

Mr. Bayre rubbed his chin thoughtfully, looking at his nephew out of the corners of his eyes, and then beckoned to him to follow across the room in the direction of a door at the further end, above which there was an elaborate device in white and gold.

Young Bayre followed slowly, reflecting that he did not know by what door he should be finally ejected from the building, and that this might be his last chance of seeing the treasures through which he was passing. His guide, perceiving

that he lingered, stopped near the door to say, impatiently and almost contemptuously,—

"Oh, you'll have plenty of time to see those things, and all the rest besides. Now you're here you won't be satisfied, I suppose, until you have been afforded an opportunity of counting up on your fingers the value of every farthing's worth."

Bayre said nothing, but again he was surprised. Had the old man been always like this, or was the late crisis in his life answerable for a most singular metamorphosis? Had he made his collection with some ulterior purpose, either of disposing of it at a high price or bequeathing it to the nation with posthumous ostentation?

This latter idea seemed a probable one, he thought, for throughout the old man's whole demeanor, in every word he uttered and in every look he threw at his nephew, there seemed to run the same idea of rejoicing at what he conceived to be the young man's disappointed greed.

They passed almost side by side out of the long room into a narrow passage, at the end of which was a steep and inconvenient staircase, which had evidently been an afterthought in the construction of the house.

The old man went up first, dangling the lantern and humming to himself as he went, and making so much noise that it flashed through the mind of the younger man that this might be a warning to someone near at hand to get out of the way.

At the top of the stairs, on a landing as narrow and stuffy as the staircase, Mr. Bayre turned round again and said loudly,—

"This is the room, this"—and he thumped at the door on his left as he spoke—"where you say I have a woman concealed. Well, go in and see for yourself."

Changing his lantern into his left hand, and fumbling for a few suggestive moments, he at last fitted into the lock a key which he took from the pocket of his dressing-gown, and turning it with great deliberation, he threw open the door and ushered his companion into a room so oppressively close that Bayre thought the windows could not have been opened for many days.

Once well inside, however, he forgot this inconvenience in the curiosity which the appearance of the room aroused in him.

It was a long and narrow apartment, with the two shuttered windows at one end, and an enormous satinwood wardrobe, old and rather battered, at the other.

Between the windows was a dressing-table of the makeshift sort, apparently consisting of a pile of boxes covered with an old-fashioned arrangement of faded pink calico and muslin discolored with dust and age.

On the top was a small mirror on a stand, of the kind that is usually found in servants' bedrooms, and beside it was a candle burning in a flat candle-stick.

Piled up on the available surface of the dressing-table was a heterogeneous mass of small articles, all of women's use, such as hairpins, ornamental combs for the hair, bracelets, brooches, rings, a powder-puff, some reels of cotton and silk, and a packet of needles.

In front of the dressing-table was a common cane-bottomed chair, over the back of which hung a dressing-gown and the trained skirt of a lady's silken dress. This garment attracted Bayre's attention by the old-fashioned pattern of the brocade of which it was composed.

More traces of a woman's occupation were visible on all sides: on one chair was a pile of laces and fans; on another, a magnificent cloak lined with fur; on a chest in one corner was a great heap of feathers, crumpled artificial flowers, and bits of lace and ribbon; while on the floor lay little heaps of old satin slippers, soiled gloves, and a miscellaneous assortment of odds and ends, all appertaining to the feminine toilet.

Young Bayre had not the least doubt that a woman had been in the room quite recently, probably within a few moments of his entrance with the old man. For, with his senses well on the alert, he noted one significant fact—there was dust on the surface of the chest, and there was dust on the stand of the mirror, but there was none on the various articles that lay about the room; they had evidently been taken quite recently from their cupboards and drawers.

Old Mr. Bayre's explanation of what he saw, therefore, was not satisfactory.

"This room," said he, "is just as it was left by my wife when she took it into her head to run away from me eight months ago."

"And has the candle been burning in that candlestick for all these eight months?" asked the young man, rashly.

His uncle threw at him a malevolent look, which he felt that his impudence deserved.

"No," said the old man, shortly, "I was in here myself a few minutes ago."

Bayre did not believe him. Since his statement that the crumpled finery and women's trifles had been lying there for months was evidently not true, what confidence could be put in his other assertions? Besides, there was, so the young man felt, something not exactly definable about the disposition of the various things lying about which suggested the hand of a woman rather than the heavier, more careless touch of a man.

And by a sudden inspiration he stepped forward to the chair by the dressing-table and laid his hand upon the brocaded skirt.

It was quite warm.

Bayre turned to his uncle with a significant look and the old man frowned slightly and immediately averted his eyes sullenly.

"Are you not satisfied now?" he asked shortly.

Bayre glanced round the room. There was a door nearly opposite the one by which they had entered. The old man crossed the room testily and threw it open. It was not locked.

"If you are not satisfied yet, you shall be," said he. "Come this way."

Leaving the candle burning on the dressing-table, and carrying his lantern as before, he led the way again with heavy steps; and Bayre found himself in another room, large and bare, a state bedroom of an old-fashioned type, with a ponderous wooden bedstead hung with faded damask

curtains. Through this room they passed with leisurely steps, the old man always in front, raising his lantern ostentatiously from time to time, and asking every few minutes, in a jeering tone, whether his visitor saw anything he should like to examine further.

And from this room they passed into a corridor, with windows on the one side and a row of doors on the other.

Old Mr. Bayre tried the handles of all these and found some open, in which case he insisted on his guest's entering and making such investigations as he pleased. Sometimes they were locked, and there was much searching for keys, some of which the old man professed to have mislaid, on which occasions he would ask, with elaborate civility, if it was his nephew's pleasure that he should go and look for them.

But whenever they went into a room they found no trace of any living creature within. Nothing but bare-looking apartments furnished in the taste of a past day—funereal bedsteads, ponderous wardrobes, polished floors, and a mouldy smell of little-frequented, closely shut-up rooms, where the air remained stagnant for weeks.

Sometimes a rat would scurry across the polished floor, slipping and sliding as he ran in unaccustomed terror, or a loud squeaking and scampering behind the skirting-boards of the room would denote a panic among the mice at the disturbance.

So they went on, not indeed examining every

room, but getting a general impression of dead hospitality and of vanished state.

But all the time, as they walked along or when they stood still, Bayre was haunted by the belief that he could hear the pattering of lighter feet than theirs not far off, stopping when they stopped, going on again when they went on.

Again and again he would turn quickly, hoping to catch a glimpse of the fancied companion. But the lantern threw no light behind, and if anyone followed them or preceded them he could not discover the fact.

His guide grew jocose at last, humming to himself in a cracked old voice, and making jesting remarks upon his disappointment.

"Young folk love a mystery," said he, throwing the words over his shoulder, as it were, as he went on, swinging his lantern and clanking his keys along the passages. "Especially if they can manufacture it round the figure of a woman. Now I've always hated mysteries and mystery-mongers myself, even when I was a young man. And as for women, I can only say I had nothing to do with them till late in life, and I sincerely wish I had never had anything to do with them at all."

They had long since left that portion of the building which contained the shut-up rooms, had passed through a long succession of wide attics, which the young man knew must be above the great hall, and had descended to a newer part of the house, where a different atmosphere

disclosed the fact that it was less deserted than the rest.

"This," said old Mr. Bayre, "is all we use of the old place now. You shall see my own rooms, young man, since we are here. I dare say you'll not be in a hurry to call upon me again."

Uttering these words in the same jibing tone, the old man opened the door of a luxuriously-furnished bed-chamber, where a fire burned brightly on the dogs, throwing out a pleasant perfume of burning logs, and shedding bright reflections upon the polished floor, the ceiling above, and the panels of the dark mahogany furniture.

The half-tester bedstead was massively carved and hung with dark green velvet to match the drawn window curtains, the little stumpy sofa and the two low armchairs. An old retriever, lying on a rug before the fire, wagged his tail lazily on their entrance, but did not get up.

Rather to the young man's surprise, his uncle motioned him to take one of the armchairs, and proceeded to light two wax candles, which stood on a heavy writing-table at some distance from the fire.

"You shall drink to our next merry meeting," said he, grimly, as he unlocked a cupboard and took out a massive decanter of gilded Bohemian glass and a couple of oddly-shaped glasses that matched it. "Oh, yes, I insist. You forced your way in, in your tender anxiety to see me. I can't let you go unrefreshed."

Bayre felt that he shivered. Yet he scarcely knew why.

The room was warm, cozy, handsome. The greeting of the dog, unceremonious and affectionate to its master, with never a growl or a sniff at the stranger, ought, he thought, to have set him at his ease.

Yet the young man felt that there was something sinister in this hospitality from a man who professed nothing but aversion for him, and he would have refused it if he could.

Mr. Bayre, however, was obstinate. Bringing the decanter and glasses to the long, narrow table near the fireplace, where lay some books, papers and a spectacle-case, he poured out some dark liquor that dropped out slowly, and told his guest to drink it off.

"It will keep the cold out on your journey back," said he.

The young man put the glass to his lips with a suspicion of which he felt ashamed. Old Mr. Bayre sipped his with a nod and a sort of smirk. The contents of the glass were a liqueur unknown to the younger man, sweet, strong, heady.

"Drink it," urged his host. "Do you think I want to poison you?"

His nephew obeyed with a rather hollow laugh. He did not, of course, suppose that his uncle had designs upon his life, but that there was some secret and malevolent intention underlying his grim hospitality the unwilling guest felt sure.

The potent liquor seemed to have a mollifying

effect upon old Mr. Bayre, who began to stroke the head of his dog, the while he looked meditatively at his guest, and presently said, with abruptness,—

"How long is it since I saw you last, Bartlett?"

"About twenty years, I should think, sir," replied the young man.

"Ah! and how many do you think it will be before I see you again?"

The question was put with a sort of grim jocularity.

"Am I to judge by the warmth of your reception of me, sir, or by some other criterion?"

The old man laughed, actually chuckled to himself, as he rubbed his knees.

"Ah, well, ah, well," said he, "I was more amiable once, Bartlett. We don't grow sweeter as we grow older. Look here, I don't suppose we shall see much more of each other in the years to come than we have in the years that are past. I don't see why we should. Do you?"

"N-no, sir."

"But in the meantime we'll patch up a friendship, if it's only for half an hour. You shall see some of my things, some that I prize, some that are not shown to everybody. Stay where you are," he went on, as he rose, and crossing the polished floor poured out a second glass for his nephew and refilled his own. "I'll bring you something to look at, something you won't see the counterpart of in any of your London museums."

As he spoke he went out of the room and

fumbled about, by the light of his lantern, with keys and locks, with drawers and cupboards.

Rather despising himself for his own suspicions, young Bayre could not quite conquer them. He therefore flung the second glassful of the liqueur into the fire, where it blazed up fiercely, throwing long tongues of vivid light on the heavy furniture and hangings of the room.

His uncle came peeping to the door, went back again, and returned with an armful of treasures quaint and curious, a gold cup with a notable history, a jewel that had belonged to Marie Antoinette, and many other strange and beautiful things. Together they admired them, the old man at last showing some enthusiasm for his precious curios, and chuckling at the envy his purchases had excited in other connoisseurs.

At length the young man judged that he might take his leave, since he felt convinced he should get no nearer to the truth of the mystery if he were to stay until the following morning. He rose, and making some sort of apology, which came awkwardly from his lips in the singular circumstances, moved in the direction of the door by which he had entered the room.

But his uncle beckoned him to come through the small room from which he had just brought his treasures, and they passed together through this outer chamber to a wide and handsome landing new to the guest.

Here there was a velvet divan against the wall, and a bearskin rug on the floor, while round about, on the panelled walls, there hung, in massive

frames, a few large pictures, each one of which was a masterpiece.

There was an oil-lamp suspended from the roof over the staircase, enclosed in a magnificent lantern, which had formerly hung in the mansion of a French nobleman. By the faint light this gave Bayre saw enough of the paintings around him to assure himself that they were worthy of the rest of the collection, and when his uncle signed to him to go down first, he went slowly, gazing about him at every step.

Between the pictures were trophies of shields, swords, spears and other weapons, arranged against the dark oak panelling. He had got half-way down to the first turn in the staircase, when he was startled by a shrill scream in a woman's voice.

Turning quickly, the young man saw his uncle on the step behind him, with a heavy Indian war-club uplifted in his hands, and an expression on his withered face and in his sunken eyes which could only be described in one word—murderous.

CHAPTER XVI

A SECRET FOR SALE

It was the work of a moment. The scream, the turn, the threatening gesture, then the dropping of the weapon and an abrupt change on the old man's face, accompanied by a loud, forced laugh. Bayre scarcely realized what it all meant, even as he stepped hastily down to the half-landing and looked up into the misty recesses of the galleried floor above.

Then from out of the dimness he saw a face, the face of Olwen Eden; and if he had not known before what the look and gesture meant which he had surprised in his uncle, he knew now.

And there passed suddenly through his heart a great throb of joy, of exultation, for he saw in the white face the look every man longs to see on the countenance of the woman he loves—the look which is an avowal and a promise.

Old Mr. Bayre, still laughing harshly, replaced the club among the other weapons on the wall. But his hands were not steady, for it fell with a crash to the ground, and then slid down the stairs to young Bayre's feet.

The visitor thought it prudent to pick up the weapon and to retain it for future defensive purposes. His uncle left off laughing suddenly.

"Give that to me," he said.

"Not yet, sir. When I take my leave of you will be soon enough."

Old Mr. Bayre uttered an indignant grunt, but before he could speak, Olwen had run down the stairs past him and stood by the young man's side.

"What are you doing here?" asked the old man gruffly.

She turned and looked up.

"I'll show him the way out," she said. "I can draw the bolts myself and turn the key. And that will save you the risk of catching cold."

With a grunt and a muttered grumble, Mr. Bayre was apparently on the point of retreating up the stairs; but pausing for an instant to look down upon the young people, something in their attitude struck him, as he peered down by the light of his lantern and of the dim lamp above, and he descended the stairs with leisurely footsteps, keeping his eyes fixed upon his nephew.

"I can show him out," said the old man, with disagreeable emphasis. "I shall be delighted to. Olwen, you can go back to your room."

The girl hesitated and held out her hand.

"Good-bye, Mr. Bayre," said she.

The old man placed himself between them, but the young one would not be put off. He took the girl's hand and held it in his for a moment, saying, in a voice the significance of which was unmistakable, "Good-bye. And—thank you."

She ran upstairs, and the two men, the younger

still holding the club, were left face to face on the little square half-landing.

The look of veiled malignity on the old man's face was as strong as ever.

"You had better not indulge any thoughts of my ward, Bartlett," said he, dryly, as soon as the last sound of the girl's light footsteps had died away in the gallery above. "For she will marry money, money, money. There's no satisfaction in anything but money, and money she must have. Not mine. I have other uses for mine."

"Of course, sir," said the young man, more disgusted than ever with his old relation, in whom avarice appeared to have swallowed up every feeling of good-nature, of affection, and of ordinary human kindness, "you have a right to do as you please with your own property, and to entertain what opinions you please about the value of money and its place in the world, but I should have thought you might make allowance for the difference between the feelings of an old man and those of a young girl. Surely if she doesn't think money the one thing needful she might have a voice in her own destiny?"

"She'll think as I do when she's as old as I," retorted the amiable old gentleman, promptly. "And in the meantime I'm going to save her from doing anything foolish. So be warned. Come along."

As the young man declined to go first, his uncle led the way into the great shadowy hall, where their footsteps echoed in dark recesses and among the tall pillars which supported the staircase.

"You'll remember what I've said?" said the old man as he drew back the bolts of the heavy front door, which was not that by which visitors were usually admitted, but was a state entrance now apparently unused.

"Yes, and I'm much obliged to you for that and—all your other kind acts."

Old Mr. Bayre, with his hand still on the bolts, laughed again boisterously.

"Oh, you're thin-skinned," said he. "And nervous, I suppose. You don't seem to understand that you had no more right to make a forced entrance into my house, as I caught you doing, than if you were a common tramp. And you well deserve the fright I gave you when you thought—you thought—Ha, ha! you thought, I suppose, that I was going to brain you with that club!"

"It did look like it," said the young man, shortly.

The old man glanced at the weapon, which was still in his nephew's hand.

"Well, well, you were mistaken. People don't do those things," said he. "So now you can put that down and get out as quickly as you like."

As he spoke he opened the door, letting a gust of cold night air blow into the hall, force back the heavy door, and whirl the skirt of his dressing-gown about him like a sheath. And so, inhospitable, grim to the last, he let his nephew pass out without another word, and shut the door behind him with a loud clang.

Young Bayre shuddered, not with the

remembrance of the peril he could not doubt that he had escaped, but at the thought that Olwen was shut up in the house with this half-insane old man, who was no doubt irritated against her on account of the part she had played in the events of his own visit.

Bayre could not endure this thought. It was true that his uncle had shown towards the young girl none of the strange and startling animosity which he had not scrupled to exhibit to himself. But with the belief strong in his mind that such eccentricity as that of the old man could not be far removed from insanity, Bayre wondered whether the fact of her having interfered on his behalf, as she had done, might not have inflamed her guardian against her.

Yet what could he do? He could not return to the house; indeed, any such attempt would be more likely to do harm than good to the object of his solicitude.

Bayre was perplexed, troubled, confounded by all he had gone through.

That there was a mystery about his uncle and his great lonely house was undoubted: that he had someone shut up there, as Olwen believed, seemed almost as certain. The strange manner in which he had taken care to open no room too quickly, and to give any person who might be within ample time for concealment, remained in the young man's mind as a most significant fact.

Was it his young wife? And if so, what was her mental condition? Remembering that ghastly display of soiled and ancient finery in the room

with the barred windows, Bayre was inclined to think that imprisonment might have turned the brain of the captive, whoever she might be. And ugly doubts of his uncle, of whose malignity he had had ample proofs, rose in his mind again. What if he should make an attempt to reduce his bright young ward to the condition of the mysterious prisoner whose existence Olwen herself suspected?

The thought was such a terrible one that Bayre suddenly went back towards the great house, filled with vague longing to rescue the young girl from the shelter of such a doubtful home.

As he came near he saw a window in the middle of the building open, and a hand, the very turn of which he recognized, dark as it was, waving a handkerchief to him as he stopped.

He saw no face; he heard no sound. But there was something in the action that comforted him; for he had an idea that it was meant to put heart into him, and hope. He waved his own handkerchief in return, in silence also. Then the window closed and all was darkness again.

With a heart full of tender longings, but also with vague fears, he turned and went away.

He got into the avenue, and thence into the road; but before he was half-way to his lodging he was sure that he was being followed. It was not a pleasant sensation, with the doubts he had concerning the good will of the inhabitants of the island towards him. And after a time, during which he had ascertained beyond a doubt

that his suspicions were correct, Bayre doubled back quickly, and discovered, as he had half-expected, the lean form of Pierre Vazon hidden behind a clump of brambles.

"Hallo!" cried he. "Following me, eh?"

Pierre did not appear to be taken aback by the discovery. He drew himself up at once, and said,—

"Precisely, monsieur. I was following you. And I only wanted to be at a safe distance from the *château* before I spoke to you."

"Well, we are a long way off now."

"Yes, yes." The man looked at him with sly eyes which were, the young man thought, as disagreeable in their way as his uncle's were in another. If there was no malignity in those of Vazon, there was much cunning.

"And now, what have you to say?"

Pierre came very close to him.

"Am I too bold in asking whether you are anxious to find out the mystery of the great lonely *château*, monsieur?" he asked in a thick whisper.

Bayre could not wholly repress a convulsive movement at these words.

"Mystery! Is there a mystery?" he asked, trying to speak carelessly.

Pierre laughed softly under his breath.

"Oh, I think monsieur is sure of that!"

"Well, if there is, what business is it of yours, or of mine?"

"Well, monsieur, my business is that of my master, whoever he may be," said Pierre, in the

same subdued key. "And yours, I suppose, is to learn something about your relation—and his wealth."

These last words he said very slowly, with deep meaning.

"My uncle's wealth," replied Bayre, sharply, "as you call it, is not my affair, nor will it ever have any concern for me."

"It might have," said Pierre, slowly. "With a little word in your ear, sir, if you would choose that I should say it, your uncle's wealth might be a very interesting matter to you."

"Why, you old rascal, do you suppose I should levy blackmail upon my own relation?" cried Bayre, indignantly.

"Ah, well, it does him very little good, monsieur. Even his collection, which pleases all the world, has ceased to give him much pleasure," said Pierre. "So much money, money, shut up in pictures, and enamels, and nicknacks. That is so, *hein!*"

Vazon understood his master pretty well, Bayre thought, as he gave the would-be betrayer another look.

"And he has a secret, you say?"

"Yes, monsieur."

"Which you are ready to sell to me?"

"Well, well, who has a greater right to it than you, his near relation? And secrets are worth money, money. And young men like you, monsieur, can do with money, eh?"

And the peasant, like a rough Mephistopheles, came close to his ear.

Bayre drew back and looked down at him.

"Well, look here, much as I want money—I don't deny that—I'd rather scrape along through life on as many pence a day as my uncle has pounds than buy his secrets from the vermin who take his pay and are ready to sell their master!"

And with a gesture of unutterable contempt Bayre turned away and made briskly for the cliff.

He heard a mocking laugh behind him, and the word "Fool!" uttered in no very subdued tone, as he reached the path which led to the cottage where he was staying.

CHAPTER XVII

THE BLACKMAILERS

THIS interview with Pierre Vazon gave Bartlett Bayre much food for reflection.

That the peasant and his daughter had some hold upon his uncle of a doubtful kind he had long felt sure. Now, however, he could no longer entertain any doubts on the subject.

The worst of it was, that the words used by Pierre Vazon, his tone, his whole attitude, pointed rather to guilt than to madness in his employer. If he had had convincing proofs of his master's insanity, the peasant would surely not have waited to make it known to a chance visitor to the island, but would have communicated with old Mr. Bayre's legal advisers, whose address could scarcely be unknown to so astute and watchful a person.

Strong though his suspicions of his uncle were, yet stronger was the young man's disgust at the treachery of the peasant who had lived upon his master's bounty for so long. And he began to find excuses for the savagery of the old man who, living shut up as he did, after having experienced two cruel blows to his affections, was deceived, betrayed, and perhaps bullied, by creatures meaner than himself.

And then it occurred to him even to excuse the frenzy which had presumably led to his uncle's intended attack on himself. How would the recluse, living in himself, brooding always over his wrongs and his losses, regard such an attempt as his own nephew had made to get into his house?

Bayre saw the matter now in a new light, and determined to make one more effort to solve the mystery of his uncle's life, but to make it, not from the outside, in aggressive fashion, but in a mood more sympathetic towards the object of his surmises.

He was in this milder mood when, on the following morning, he met Olwen Eden on the seashore, watching the gradual rising of the water, as the tide came in, round the bases of the pillar-like rocks that fringed the island.

By the way in which she turned at his approach, very slowly, and without surprise, Bayre knew that she had been expecting to see him, perhaps waiting for him to find her.

"I've been anxious about you," said he, as he took her hand.

Already there was a pleasant sense of shy freemasonry between them. No ordinary "Good-morning's," "How do you do's?" and the like worrying necessities of the casual acquaintance, were needed between them any longer.

"Anxious! Why?"

"Because of what happened last night. I was afraid he might be angry with you for taking my part."

"Taking your part? How did I do that?"

"Well, I think, if you hadn't cried out when you did, that my uncle would have brained me."

"That's what I thought. And that's why I screamed. But, do you know, afterwards, when you'd gone away and he called me out on the landing to speak to me, and to tell me what had happened, I think I began to feel there was some excuse for him."

"I feel that too," said Bayre.

And then they both began to look at each other shyly and to laugh heartily at the same moment.

"What did he say?" asked Bayre, at last.

"I can't tell you *all*," said she, with a demure look. "What he said demands considerable expurgation for your ears. We will say that he hinted mildly that the front door is a more desirable entrance for a dutiful and affectionate nephew than the drawing-room window. Will that do?"

Bayre laughed again.

"I feel that myself, I assure you. But, on the other hand, hasn't he wiped out my offence by attempting to retaliate with an Indian war club?"

"Now let's be serious," said she, when they had exhausted their merriment over this view of the case. "He takes the matter very seriously indeed, I can tell you. And when I suggested that his eccentricity might well seem like insanity to a stranger, and that it made you nervous to know that I was in the house, he said that was no excuse

for your action. And really, I almost think he was right."

"So do I. And I mean to apologize to him."

"I think he would rather not see you again, even for that."

"But I want to apologize. I want also to put him on his guard against certain persons who are more likely to do him injury than I am."

She looked at him steadily.

"Do you think he doesn't know? He's not mad, Mr. Bayre. There's something mysterious about him and about the place, but I don't think it's that. Last night he spoke to me in a way no madman ever could have done."

"Don't you know that many insane people could pass for sane, and do so pass? There are many forms of brain disease. There's the insanity of delusions; there's that which comes on in paroxysms and leaves the victim calm and even rational in the intervals. How can you explain such a scene as that I witnessed with my own eyes when I saw my uncle destroying his own house?"

Olwen looked puzzled.

"I've seen him tapping the walls, as if listening for some expected answer," admitted she in a low voice. "And then I've wondered whether he only *fancied* that there was some person hidden about the house. But at other times—"

"Well!"

"I've thought differently, as you know."

"There *is* a woman hidden in the house," said Bayre, confidently.

And he described to her what he had seen on the previous night in the room with the barred windows. Olwen was not surprised.

"After all," she said presently, "there's something in what he said, that it's no business of ours if he does keep some person shut up in the house."

"No business of ours?" cried Bayre. "If he keeps a woman shut up against her will!"

"Ah, but it can't be against her will," said Olwen, "for there's no doubt she could make herself heard if she chose. Remember, this place is a regular haunt of tourists in the summer; they come over by dozens to see Mr. Bayre's collection. Now how is it possible, considering that you can get round the house without difficulty, that a woman could be shut up against her will in it, with only a feeble old man as jailer? You can see that it's impossible."

"But she may have only been there a few months or weeks, since the tourist season?" suggested Bayre, half-heartedly.

For indeed Olwen's objection seemed to be a reasonable one.

"But I've been here all that time," rejoined she. "And though I have the same feeling as you, that there is someone shut up there, I can't understand how she can be kept there against her will. It's true I don't go all over the house; but I do go all round it. And if this absurd thing were possible, that a live woman were imprisoned there, I can't believe that she wouldn't have made me some sign during all this time."

This did indeed seem conclusive, though it left the matter more mysterious than ever.

"It's only during the last few weeks that you've had this idea of a woman shut up there?" said he.

"Yes. Since your first visit. I remember talking to you one day about romance, and your teasing me a little about my ambition to write novels. Well, now that I've come in contact with romance, I don't like it at all; and I'd willingly exchange this uneasy feeling I always have that something's going to happen—something mysterious, awful—for a nice, tame, flat, common-place existence such as they describe in books by the word 'suburban.' "

Bayre laughed.

"No," said he. "Believe me, you'd better suffer the ills you know, the imaginary lady who, after all, doesn't interfere with you, and the rather lonely existence you lead here, than fly to the cold mutton, the cheap piano and the villa one brick thick, which are some of the suburban ills you dream not of."

He said this fiercely, fighting down that ugly subconsciousness that the one-brick-thick villa, or the even lower horror of the cheap flat, was all that he could reasonably hope to offer that foolish woman, whoever she might be, who would ever consent to link her life with the clerk of small salary and unsatisfied ambition.

Perhaps the quick-witted girl guessed something of that which was in his mind, for her answer was given in very gentle, almost soothing, tones.

"I think the thickness of the villa must depend a good deal upon the character of the tenants," she prettily said.

And Bayre smiled shyly, wishing that he dared say more. But she would not give him time. He was to remember that she had thrust aside all sentiment, had banished it from their intercourse. They were to behave to each other as if that crazy avowal of his love for her had never been offered. Bayre looked wistful, but he submitted. A time would come—perhaps!

"I'm grateful to you for one thing, at any rate," she said, following the train of her thoughts rather than that of the conversation, "that you've got rid of Monsieur Blaise for me."

"I!" echoed Bayre.

"Yes, you," said Olwen, as she began to climb the steep path to the top of the cliff. "I have an idea that, but for your coming, and the mysterious visit to my uncle to which it led, I should have dropped at last, in a helpless sort of way, into the lion's mouth."

"You wouldn't!" cried Bayre, indignantly. And hastening after her up the slope, he hissed out in her ear, "If I thought there was any danger of that, I'd stay here, throw up my appointment, spoil my chances in life, such as they are, and stick here like a limpet till I'd persuaded you to spoil your chances too, to come away with me, though it wouldn't even be to the jerry-built villa, but to two rooms on some dingy top-floor, with a man who would give his life for you!"

Perhaps this bland superiority to sentiment which Miss Eden had worn so bravely was only a mask after all. Certain it is that, as she now turned fiercely and haughtily round on him, addressing him as if he were the lowest of slaves, there burned in her bright eyes a fire which was that neither of anger nor of contempt, while there was something inviting, something sympathetic in the very gesture with which she made as if to beat off her too passionate lover.

"Didn't I forbid you to talk like that to me? How dare you? Do you suppose I want to starve myself, or to see you starve?" she asked, with her pretty head held very high and her breast heaving with excitement. "Understand, once for all, I forbid you to talk of those things. You're to go back to your office and work, work, work; and you're to spend the next ten years of your life perhaps in struggling, struggling to get the hearing that comes to every man who has anything to tell. And I'm going back to my life, which is not such a bad one after all. And if I liked to marry another Monsieur Blaise—(if there's another such treasure about who would have me)" she added with demure fun sparkling in her eyes—"why, it's no business of yours, and I'm quite at liberty to do it if I like. There!"

With which girlish challenge Miss Eden turned again, and continued her scramble upwards, not, however, disdaining the help of a friendly but respectful hand when the way was rough or the ground slippery.

"May I just venture to ask," said Bayre, when they arrived rather breathless at the top of the cliff, "whether you mean to beguile the time with any more novel-writing?"

And if there had been mischief in her eyes during her last speech it was his turn to be quietly humorous now. She drew herself up defiantly.

"Oh, *I have* beguiled it in that way," she said promptly. "I've written a whole one since you were here last."

"Won't you let me see it? Being an unsuccessful writer myself, I'm a first-class critic ready-made."

She shook her head and smiled, looking down.

"Oh, I don't for a moment suppose it would stand criticism, especially your criticism."

"Why especially mine?"

"I know, from what you said to me before about my lack of experience, that you're not prepared to be complimentary."

"Compliments do a novel no good, either when they're spoken or when they're written. What you want to make a book successful is criticism that's absolutely venomous. Couldn't you trust me to supply that?"

The girl threw him a bright glance.

"No," said she, mischievously, as she turned and ran away, leaving him more in love with her than ever.

This interview with the girl he loved acted upon Bartlett Bayre as a powerful stimulant, and

under its influence he decided not to delay one moment, but to go once more up to the *château* and to see his uncle again.

In the apologetic mood in which he now found himself, he felt, without much reason, perhaps, that he would find admission easier than before. He was not, however, called upon to make the attempt, for on entering the avenue which led to the great house, he came face to face with his uncle, wrapped to the chin in a stout ulster, taking a brisk constitutional up and down under the bare trees.

"Oh, it's you again, is it?" said old Mr. Bayre, without removing his old pipe from his mouth.

"Yes, sir, I've come to apologize."

"Good Heavens! that's news indeed!"

"And I've come to warn you that you are putting confidence in certain people who don't deserve it," went on the young man, taking no notice of his uncle's sneer.

The old man looked him full in the eyes.

"Whom do you mean?" said he.

"Come a little way with me, sir, and I'll show you—without one word, too," answered the young man.

His uncle continued to look at him with scrutinizing eyes for some moments; then, agreeing to the proposition with a simple nod, he went out through the gate at the end of the avenue side by side with him.

The young man led the way towards the cottage

of the Vazons without a word more, and his uncle being equally taciturn, they trudged on together in the face of a keen wind, in dead silence.

They met no one on the way, and when they came to the cottage they walked quickly past the window, and the younger man lifted the latch of the door and led the way into the comfortable living-room, which was kitchen as well.

The only occupant of the room, as it chanced, was the baby in its cradle, so that nothing could have been easier than was the unmasking of the two conspirators.

Young Bayre crossed the room quickly, turned the cradle to the light, and pointed down at the child.

"You are paying the Vazons for the care of a child, sir," said he. "Is this the one?"

The old man uttered an exclamation, and at that moment the sound of voices brought Marie into the room.

One glance at the faces of the two gentlemen showed her that her fraud was discovered, and she uttered a low, frightened cry.

Old Mr. Bayre caught her by the arm in a tumult of rage.

"That child," cried he, in a shaking voice, a voice full not only of anger but of fear. "Who is it?"

She looked from the one man to the other, stammered, and turned furiously upon the younger.

"*Lâche*!" cried she in a hoarse voice, "it is you who have done this. I know it. What business was it of yours to come here making mischief?"

And she stood with her hand to her heart, panting with fear and rage.

"Whose is this child?" repeated old Mr. Bayre, furiously. "It is not mine."

He shook her roughly by the arm as he spoke.

But his anger woke an answering spirit in the girl. Drawing herself away from him, she stood at bay. And frowning up at him from under her thick eyebrows, with a look which changed her rather handsome face into one hideous and repellent, she hissed out, in a menacing tone,—

"Yours? No. Of course I know that."

Old Mr. Bayre paused an instant. Then he made a sort of spring at her, and asked, in a low voice,—

"What has become of the other—of mine?"

The girl looked frightened again. She hesitated, she faltered, she looked from one man to the other, she began to cry and to sob. In vain did the elder try to get a word of answer from her; she would do nothing but sob and complain bitterly that there was no pleasing such masters, that she would take no more care of the child since she was not trusted. Monsieur might get somebody else to do it, for she would not.

And then, in the midst of her weeping, she suddenly stopped, raised her head, and strained her ears. Then, with a joyful cry, "Ha! My

father!" she dashed open the door and admitted old Pierre, who looked from one to the other of the group with a mixture of anxiety and brutal cunning in his eyes.

CHAPTER XVIII

RETRIBUTION

MARIE sprang towards her father and poured out a torrent of broken words. Angry, anxious, excited, it was difficult to make out what sentiment was uppermost in her, and her father seemed also, at first, undecided as to the attitude he should adopt towards the two gentlemen.

"They accuse me, my father—they accuse me!" cried the girl, panting. "They say—Monsieur Bayre says—I do not take care of the child. He who comes here but once in six months, what should he know? He says this is not the child we are paid to take care of. My father, answer him, answer them both!"

Old Mr. Bayre was standing with his back to the window, his arms folded, and his peaked cap, which he had not taken off on entering the cottage, drawn well down over his eyes. The expression of his mouth, however, denoted sufficiently the stern mood he was in. His nephew remained in the background, feeling awkward, but realizing that he was bound to stand by his relative, since it was he who had brought about the discovery of the fraud.

"Whose child is it that you have there?" repeated old Mr. Bayre, sternly. "Is it not the

child of some fisherman, of some friend or relation of your own, that you are keeping there and making me pay for?"

Pierre had by this time made up his mind as to the attitude he should take up, and he faced his master with surly defiance.

"You shall hear all you want to know on that point, monsieur," said he, "when we are by ourselves, you and I! It is no matter for discussion before others, as I think you will admit if you consider certain points which will have to be raised."

This was a challenge. Old Mr. Bayre knew this, and was silent for a moment, while Marie, who saw the scale turning in her favor, ventured to indulge in a short laugh. But the exhibition was premature. The old gentleman turned upon her savagely, and cried out, in threatening tones,—

"Silence, girl! I will have this matter sifted to the bottom; and unless you can satisfy me as to what you have done with the child—my child—which I am paying you extravagantly for the care of, you will both leave the island without delay."

Both father and daughter were for the moment struck dumb by this menace. Then they looked at each other furtively, and appearing to derive confidence from that exchange of glances, stood up to him more boldly than before.

Pierre took the initiative.

"Brave words, monsieur!" said he, "but I think

you will be glad to recall them presently. Do you forget what we *know*."

His voice went up shrilly on the last word, but Mr. Bayre stood firm.

"You know nothing that can affect me, your master," he retorted sharply, "but a great deal that can affect yourselves. I don't mean to take this deception of yours quietly, and so I tell you."

"And how will you take it when I spread in the islands the story of the last few months?" asked Pierre, not, however, with quite so much assurance as before; for it was clear that he began to have an uneasy feeling that his power over his master was not so great as he had supposed.

Old Mr. Bayre laughed harshly and snapped his fingers.

"Take it!" echoed he. "I shall take it as everybody else will take it, as the silly story of a couple of silly peasants who got turned out of their comfortable berth for practising a fraud upon their master, and who have invented a lot of idle tales in the vain hope of injuring him."

The consternation which this turning of the tables produced upon the Vazons was for the moment overpowering. Marie uttered a moan of horror, while Pierre grew livid with disappointed malice.

Then Marie glanced at the younger Bayre, and an idea flashed into her mind.

"You have told him, told him everything, and you have joined together to keep up this secret,

this plot!" cried she, advancing upon the old man and peering angrily into his face. "You think, when there are two of you in it, you can defy us and everybody. But you shall not! Oh, you shall not! You shall neither of you profit by this wickedness—"

"Wickedness! You talk of wickedness, *you!*" cried old Mr. Bayre.

"Yes. What was our deceit to yours? It was a trifle, a nothing. And for you to talk to us of greed! Ha! ha! ha!"

And she burst into an hysterical mocking laugh as she fell back away from the old man, retreating again to her father's side.

Young Bayre, not moving from his corner, held his tongue, hoping each moment that some word would drop which would let him as much into the secret as the Vazons believed that he was already.

But a certain reticence, born of their rustic cunning, characterized their utterances even in the heat of passion. They alluded to facts, but they took care to make no direct statement, and for all his interest, and for all their outbursts, he remained as much in the dark as ever.

Old Mr. Bayre increased in confidence, too, on realizing that his own secret remained undisclosed, and it was with almost a jaunty air that he suddenly turned to his nephew and beckoned him out of the house.

"We are more than a match, I think, Bartlett, for these malignant rustics," he said, as he led the way out and turned at the door to say,

"You understand that I mean to find out where the child is—the child I put in your charge —*my* child!"

And he slammed the door in the face of another outburst, half indignant, half plaintive, from father and daughter.

The two gentlemen walked along in silence for some distance. The younger, who had little doubt that he knew where his uncle's child was, thought it better, in the face of various mysterious circumstances, to keep this knowledge to himself. He could not feel that he was showing brutal callousness to the feelings of a father, since that father had remained for months within a mile of his child without making any attempt to see him. A parent who could be so placidly indifferent to the well-being of his son might well, his nephew thought, be left in ignorance on the matter a little longer.

Old Mr. Bayre, on his side, was not inclined to be expansive. He glanced from time to time at his nephew, as if curious to know what he thought of the affair; but beyond a few casual remarks upon the duplicity of these people, and the sagacity his companion had shown in discovering the fraud, he said little until they reached the avenue, where he stopped short, as if with an intimation that at this point it would be fitting to bring their interview to an end.

"What does a young fellow like you know about children, that you should have discovered this deceit?" he asked curiously.

"Well, I had heard the age of my young cousin,

and it was easy to see that the baby in the Vazons' care was not only much younger, but was not of the same class," said Bayre, secretly amused when he remembered at what expense of mental worry his uncommon experience had been gained.

Old Mr. Bayre still looked rather puzzled, but all he said was,—

"Ah! Very acute. You have a suspicious mind, I see." He paused a moment, and then added, without looking at his nephew: "You appear to have a great deal of time to waste in holidays."

The remark seemed so comically ungrateful, after the service he had just rendered his uncle, that the young man could not help smiling.

"I go back to-morrow," he said simply. "So as I suppose you will not wish me to come and take a formal farewell, I can wish you good-bye now."

He did not offer to shake hands, neither did his uncle. With a scrutinizing look at him from under the peak of his cap, the old man nodded, and saying shortly, "Well, good-bye," disappeared along the avenue.

Young Bayre felt sore, though without much reason. Knowing what he did of his uncle, he might have guessed that the old man would merely balance the small service done him against his nephew's burglarious entry, and would cry quits.

Uneasy and restless, still puzzling his head about the mystery surrounding the *château*, and

by no means satisfied with the way in which Olwen had taken her leave of him that morning, Bayre was in two minds as to whether he should remain so much as an hour longer on the island of Creux, or whether he should return at once to Guernsey, shaking off the dust from his feet and vowing never to land on the smaller island again.

But the longing for one more interview with Olwen was too strong for him. On the following day he must return to London; he would make one last attempt to see her before he had to go away, and to take what would perhaps prove a last farewell of the only woman who had ever exercised an overwhelming fascination over him.

So that afternoon, after wandering about the island, and noting that the Vazons spied upon his movements with great assiduity, he turned his steps once more in the direction of the *château*, and was lucky enough to descry the object of his search in the grounds on the further side of the mansion.

Bayre made no scruple of trespassing; there was a wall on this side of no great height, and he scaled it without difficulty, and landed in a bed of flowers which, now that the snow had disappeared, spread a charming carpet of rich color over the dark earth.

The young girl reddened as he leapt over the flower-beds on his way to her. She had something in her hand which attracted his attention at once.

"The latest novel?" asked he, smiling.

She laughed as she turned over the leaves of a portentous pile of foolscap.

"How would you like me to keep you to your promise, now that you see how much there is of it?" said she, archly.

For answer he took the MS. by force from her hands.

"I'll stand to my guns nobly," said he. "And if I can I'll get it published for you. Don't expect too much; I've never succeeded in selling one of my own. But perhaps something will give me more courage now that I'm trying for you."

"Oh, of course you won't get anybody to buy it," said she, shaking her head slowly. "And if you did, it would be a bad sign for its merit, wouldn't it? When you have real talent you always have to wait years and years, don't you?"

"Not always. Dickens was famous at twenty-five."

"Ah! But then he was Dickens! And I'm not even twenty-five."

"No. But in half a dozen years you will be. And if you're celebrated by that time you won't have reason to complain."

She smiled, and her pretty eyes glowed, but she still shook her head.

"I'm not so ambitious as that," she said. All I want is for you to read this, as you offered to do, you know, and to tell me whether you think there will ever be any chance for me, not to be famous, I don't hope for that, but to be just

one of the modest workers in the field. But there's one thing you must promise," and she became very earnest indeed. "It is that you won't even read one word till you've got to London."

"I promise," said Bayre. "After all, that won't be so long to wait. I shall be back there to-morrow."

To his infinite satisfaction a shade passed over the young girl's face at this intelligence.

"Yes, I know," said she. "My guardian told me so an hour ago."

"Are you glad?" ventured Bayre.

"Don't ask me," she said briskly, "because I won't tell. It's nothing to you; it never can be anything, whether I'm glad or sorry."

"You mustn't say that. In a perfectly frigid and disinterested way you may surely be sorry that your critic, the venomous critic who could be so useful in stinging you to better work, will be too far away to sting by Tuesday morning."

She suddenly bit her lip.

"That's unfair of you," she said rather tremulously. "When I say I don't wish to feel glad or sorry, you should try to feel the same."

"Very well. But tell me, will you treat me as you did before? When I write, as I must write about this MS., will you leave me without an answer?"

Suddenly the girl looked up into his face, looked up with such a glory of hidden meaning in her great eyes as set his heart beating very fast. Looking at him still, and blushing a rosy

pink, she pointed to the roll of paper in his hands.

"Perhaps when you've read that you won't ask for an answer," she said. "Good-bye, Mr. Bayre."

She held out her hand. Scarcely master of himself, fighting to keep down the torrent of passion which boiled and surged within him, he pressed her fingers to his lips, secure in the knowledge that, whether the feeling were transitory or not, he had excited in her an emotion such as good Monsieur Blaise could never have done.

"Good-bye, good-bye," murmured he, hoarsely. "Listen, Olwen—"

But she would not listen. Cleverly waiting for her opportunity, she abruptly tore her hand away and fled towards the house, taking the way of the courtyard, where, for fear of the servants' eyes, he could not follow her.

Agitated, excited, moved out of himself, Bayre stood for an instant where she had left him, feeling the touch of her sensitive fingers still on his hand, the rays shot by her glorious eyes still shining right into his heart.

It was encouragement, real encouragement that he had got at last. The very bundle of her own writing which he held in his hand was a pledge of that: ill-written, futile as it might be, this girlish outpouring, it was dear to her, at any rate; it was a part of her young self that she would not trust to the eyes of the first person she met.

Even as he thought this his fingers closed upon the paper more tightly. He was turning to leave the garden when there rang through the clear air a sound which made him shiver.

It was a hoarse cry, muffled at first, then clearer, louder, the cry of "Help! Help! Murder!"

CHAPTER XIX

GOOD-BYE

"MURDER!"

The cry came from some part of the wood which surrounded the house and grounds on all sides but one. It was impossible to recognize the voice, but it was not Olwen's.

Bayre shouted in answer, and then he heard the cry again and plunging in among the bushes which grew thick under the trees of the plantation, he presently heard it for the third time, uttered more faintly than before, and then he came suddenly upon a scene of weird horror.

In a little clearing, not many feet from a small round pond which was swollen by the recent wet weather, two men were struggling in a hand-to-hand tussle, in which one of them was obviously getting the best of it. This one was Pierre Vazon, who, hatless, with a scar across his face and blood in his matted hair, was kneeling on the body of his master and twisting the neck-cloth of the latter more and more tightly round his throat. Bayre uttered a cry of horror; his uncle lay gasping on the ground, his face livid, his eye-balls starting, trying in vain to utter more than a stifled cry.

He was indeed very nearly at the last gasp,

and the blood was coming from his nostrils as he made a feeble attempt to clutch the arms of his assailant and to free himself from the fatal pressure under which he felt his very life ebbing away.

One moment was enough for Bayre to take in every detail of the scene, and to understand that the rascally blackmailer, now that his master had defied him, intended to murder him, since his own career of successful dishonesty had come to an end.

The appearance of Mr. Bayre's nephew, however, put an instant change upon the face of affairs.

"Rascal!" cried the young man, as he leapt down the slope, at the foot of which the outrage had taken place.

And seizing the peasant by the neck of his blouse, he applied to him the very same tactics that Pierre had applied to his master; and twisting a strong hand so tightly in the clothes about his neck that the peasant cried for mercy in his turn, he dragged him off the body of the prostrate old man, and edging him nearer and nearer to the black and slimy water of the little pond, at last, with a sudden deft movement, flung him with a splash into it.

It was not deep enough to drown the rogue, who, however, continued to utter yelping cries as he floundered out of the mud; but Bayre had no more attention to spare for him: his uncle, whom he at first believed to be dying, claimed all his care.

But, by an astonishing circumstance, the very approach of his preserver seemed to fill him with more terror than had the attack of his murderous servant. Old Mr. Bayre, still panting and gasping for breath, turned his bloodshot eyes upon his nephew, and at the sight of him, by a supreme effort, turned over, and scrambling up upon his hands and knees, dragged himself away on all fours into the shelter of the trees and bushes, as if an encounter with his nephew were more to be feared than that through which he had just passed.

Bayre, astonished as he was, rather admired the old man's consistency and pluck. Frankly disliking his nephew, persistently showing his dislike in avoidance when he could, in tone and manner when he could not, he was game to the last, and ran away from the young man's help as he had previously done from his visits.

The flesh, however, was weaker than the spirit, and by the time he had crawled as far as the door of the mansion, leaving a trail of blood on the stones of the courtyard from a wound in his neck, the old man sank down exhausted, unable to pull the iron bell-handle, or even to knock for admittance.

Luckily he had been seen from the house, and Marie Vazon opened the door and let him in. The girl's face was white with alarm; and young Bayre, who had followed his unfortunate uncle at a little distance, ready with assistance in case he should have to give in, felt no fear that she would be as brutal as her father.

However, he did not feel sufficient confidence in her to leave the feeble old man entirely to her care. After waiting for a short space, to give these two time to leave the hall, he rang the bell, and was glad to find his summons answered by one of the other servants, an older woman of the same unpolished class, who opened the door only a little way and peeped at him with a face full of alarm.

"You had better let me in," he said with authority. "You know who I am—Mr. Bayre's nephew. I have just been witness to an assault made upon him by Pierre Vazon, who would have killed him but for my interference."

Whether the woman would have dared to let him in, torn as she evidently was between fear of offending her master and terror of the Vazons, Bayre did not know. But at that moment Olwen, who evidently knew something of the business already, came running into the hall, and held the door wide for him to enter.

"Thank heaven you were still here!" she whispered hoarsely. "You've saved his life, and he knows it."

The servant had disappeared, leaving the two young people alone.

"How is he? Shall I go across for a doctor?" asked Bayre.

She shook her head.

"He won't allow it. I've just asked him. He's very weak, but he's so determined, so obstinate, that I think his spirit will pull him through. Wait here. He shall see you before you go."

But Bayre had already made up his mind that he would not leave the house until he had seen the second member of the Vazon family turned out of it; as he well knew that, though Marie might not be as brutal as her father, she could only remain as a traitor in the camp, and her presence, as a connection of a would-be murderer, could not be tolerated there any longer.

"I don't mean to go," said he, "until I have seen Vazon's daughter as well as himself not only out of the house but off the island. You might tell the young woman so, and perhaps she will take herself off at once and save trouble."

It is more than probable that Marie Vazon, who had already heard from her master something of what had happened, was listening outside the door as the young man spoke. However that may be, when Olwen left the room with the intention of giving her notice to go, Marie was nowhere to be seen. Olwen found her uncle lying on the sofa in the ground-floor room he usually occupied in the day time, the room where he had had the memorable interview with his nephew and Monsieur Blaise.

A small log fire was burning on the hearth, and the heavy window curtains were drawn so as to exclude almost all light. The old man lay on a dark-colored sofa with his back to those few rays of light which could make their way in under the circumstances. He was quite alone.

"How do you feel now?" she asked gently.

"Better. Quite well," snapped the old man,

shortly. "I only wanted a mouthful of my old brandy to put me right."

And he pointed to a decanter and tiny glass on a table near him.

"Who got it out for you?" asked she.

"That girl Marie," answered the old man.

And although she could not see his face clearly, Olwen could tell by his voice that he for one would show no reluctance at parting with her.

"Your nephew wants to see her and her father off the island before he goes away," said Olwen, watching for the effect of her words.

It was electric. The old man struggled up to his elbow and stared at her.

"Ah, you have let him in then? I'm to get rid of one greedy rascal only to let in another?"

"Not greedy," said she, gently. "You can't fairly accuse him of that."

"Greedy and inquisitive," repeated the old man, obstinately. "What right has he to come here? He's not my heir; he'll never get a penny from me. And he may save himself the trouble of his visits for all he'll ever get out of Creux."

"Oh, I don't know about that," said Olwen, with a little demure archness in her tone.

The old man stared at her indignantly.

"What fools girls are!" said he, scornfully. "Don't you see that he only comes after you because he thinks you'll have some of my money?"

"Oh, no, he doesn't. He knows, as I know, what a strong dislike you have taken to him, and we don't either of us expect anything from you.

That doesn't prevent our wishing to do our duty, and it didn't prevent him from saving your life. Remember that."

But the pig-headed old man only growled out,—

"He knew if Vazon had strangled me this afternoon he would have got nothing. And he hoped, by saving my life, to induce me to alter my will."

The idea that young Bayre should have been influenced by any such sordid motives as he rushed forward to his uncle's assistance was so absurd that the girl burst out laughing.

"I think you're a little prejudiced," she said. "But I won't tease you about it now. I'll go and tell him that you're more afraid of him than the Vazons, and that you don't wish him to stay in the house."

Perhaps reason began to get the better of the old man's prejudice, or perhaps the very real peril he had escaped suddenly came back to his mind and made him timorous. He put out a trembling hand and detained her to say,—

"Well, well, let him stay if he likes. Let's play one rogue off against the other!"

With which grateful remark he let her go.

She and Bayre laughed softly together over the scene, which she described to him, and then she brought in her own little silver kettle and stand, with which she was in the habit of making tea for herself and her guardian in the afternoon; and the two young people amused themselves very well in making the spirit-lamp boil the water, and in very discreet conversation over their tea afterwards.

She kept well on her guard, and was decidedly

prim. But he could not help knowing, though no allusion was made to the precious bundle of MS. which he was carrying about with him or to the secret tie by which this bound them together, that Olwen was even brighter than usual, and that the happiness which sparkled in her eyes might be ascribed to the pleasure she felt in his visit.

There were so many anxious questions disturbing their minds that they both seemed to take a perverse satisfaction in avoiding them all; so they discussed neither the Vazons and their probable conduct nor the mystery of the woman whom they believed to be shut up in the *château;* nor the strange prejudice with which old Mr. Bayre regarded his nephew.

It was not until Olwen rose to carry a cup of tea to her guardian that she suddenly turned at the door and said, in a low voice,—

"What do you think these Vazons will do? I'm afraid of them."

"I'll give information to the police when I get back to Guernsey," said he, in the same tone, "and in the meantime we'd better keep careful watch. I should like to know what has become of the girl."

The result of their fears and of their consultation was that Bayre decided to remain awake and to keep watch in order to circumvent any attempt which might be made upon old Mr. Bayre that night.

At his nephew's suggestion, Olwen had proposed that the police of Guernsey should be communicated with that very day. But old Mr. Bayre

flatly forbade this, and the prohibition seemed so strange, considering that the attack upon him had been a murderous one, that it was no wonder the suspicions of the two young people concerning old Mr. Bayre himself began to grow strong again.

Why, unless he feared the result of an investigation into his house and his affairs, should the old man object to such an obvious measure for his own protection?

He gave as a reason for his objection that he was loth to treat old servants with harshness, and he added that he was sure Vazon had no intention of killing him, although he admitted that they had had a quarrel.

But this reason appeared very like a lame excuse, since old Mr. Bayre was by no means now, whatever he might have been once, the benevolent old philanthropist, brimming over with loving-kindness towards his fellow-creatures, which such leniency would have seemed to imply that he was.

The wind began to rise soon after dark, and Bayre felt the weird influence of the great shut-up house when he was left to himself in the night silence, in the bare *salon* with its polished floor and its white walls.

Old Mr. Bayre had managed, after rejecting the proffered help of his nephew, to get upstairs to his bedroom with the help of the stronger of the two servants; he was nervous, Olwen said, and peered and listened as he went slowly upwards.

He too seemed to have suspicions of the baffled blackmailers, so Olwen thought.

Now that he was left alone, young Bayre found his thoughts revert again to the mystery about the mansion; he began to listen for footsteps along the corridors above, to wonder whether this night-watch would bring him any nearer the clue to the secret.

Creeping softly about the room, he soon fancied that he could hear another step as stealthy as his own in one of the adjoining apartments, and after some time he was almost sure that he could make out the sound of whispering voices.

Opening the door at the end of the room very carefully, he became aware that the whispering came from a room beyond that, and that the voices were those of two persons.

Traversing this second apartment in the same stealthy manner as he had done the first, and slipping off his boots so that he might make the less noise, Bayre reached the door at the end, and was then aware, by the wind which blew through the keyhole and round the crack of the door, that there was either a door or a window open in the room beyond—the room whence the voices came.

By this time he could make out that the voice which spoke from the inner side of the open door or window was that of Marie Vazon, and he judged that she was conversing with someone outside the house, who, he had little doubt, was her father.

From certain further sounds Bayre guessed that the precious pair were engaged in robbing the house, and that Marie, from the inside, was handing such articles of portable property as she fancied to her father, who stood without.

And as the apparent loneliness of the house made them bolder, both father and daughter allowed their voices to grow a little louder, so that in the end Bayre was able to make out what they said.

"I couldn't get into the old man's bedroom, for it was locked all day," she said, "nor into the museum rooms, for they were locked too. But I've got some money and some good things, besides what I've given you, and I've found a little iron box that probably contains something of value. Here."

When she got as far as that, Bayre judged that it was time to interfere. Opening the door quickly, he sprang upon the girl, who was standing without a light by the open window, mounted on a chair.

"What have you got there, you thieves?" cried he, seizing her arm as he spoke and trying to drag it down.

But she was too quick for him. He heard the iron box fall with a dull sound, as of something heavy, to the ground outside, before he succeeded in dragging her down from her perch. "Let me go!" cried she. "Let me go, monsieur, and I'll tell you a secret—your uncle's secret."

"Tell nothing, tell nothing!" warned the old

peasant's voice from outside. "A secret is worth a good price, *ma fille*. Keep it close."

And the girl, looking up with a shudder at the determined face of the young man who still held her by the arm, closed her lips firmly, and crossed her arms, and defied him.

CHAPTER XX

AND AGAIN GOOD-BYE

BAYRE saw that nothing was to be got out of the sullen peasant woman, so he led her out of the room, and into the hall, where Olwen, who had heard the noise of loud voices, was standing at the foot of the staircase.

Marie Vazon looked at her with an insolent frown.

"What was that noise?" asked Olwen. "And what was it that dropped or was thrown out of the window?"

Marie laughed harshly.

"Nothing of yours," she replied insolently. "And nothing that you need concern yourselves about, either of you. Better hold your tongues about us, as well as about your uncle, if you want to keep the family respected. And you, monsieur, you can let me go. You will get nothing out of me, I can tell you."

Bayre quite agreed with her on this point, and he drew the bolts of the door and let her out. He wanted to follow her, and to find out what she and her father were going to do with the booty they had obtained from the mansion; especially was he anxious to know what had become of the iron box which Marie had thrown out of the window

to her father. But Olwen was suffering so severely from nervous shock, consequent upon the events of the day and the disturbance of the night, that she begged him not to leave the house until morning, alleging the terror she felt at the thought of being alone in the house with her disabled guardian and with two women-servants, both of whom were in a state of panic themselves.

Although he feared that this delay would enable the Vazons to get away with some valuable stolen property, the young man was unable to turn a deaf ear to the girl's pleading; and he therefore spent the rest of the night in an uneasy patrol of the mansion, after shutting down the window through which Marie had communicated with her father, and cast out, as he could not but doubt, some of her master's property.

With the first rays of morning, however, he had decided to go to the cottage of the Vazons in the hope that he might yet be in time to intercept their flight. But an unexpected obstacle was placed in his way. Olwen met him as he was drawing the bolt of the door, and told him that his uncle wished to see him.

She led him upstairs to the door of the old man's room, where Bayre was rather surprised to find the invalid dressed and sitting in an easy chair by the embers of the fire. The curtains were still drawn, and the great room, which looked so cozy by candle-light seemed cheerless as the grey morning light fell upon the ashes in the grate and upon the bent head of the old man in the chair.

"What is this Olwen tells me about a robbery in the night by the Vazons?" asked he. "She says they threw out an iron box. What iron box was it?"

It was evident that the old man was more uneasy than he wished to appear. Bayre had not much to tell.

"The girl didn't seem to know what was in it herself," said he. "I heard her say that it probably contained something of value. That was all. I could not hear whether the father made any reply."

He saw his uncle's foot tapping the floor with a rapid, nervous movement. But the old man only said,—

"I know of no iron box; they have got hold of some lumber, I suppose, which, in their cupidity, they imagine to be valuable. But they will find themselves sold. My collection lies all in open cases, with the exception of a few things which I keep in a safe in the next room. These people have no discrimination. Olwen has been through the galleries this morning, and the two salons, and she says she finds nothing missing."

"The girl Marie must have known that I was in the house, too near the rooms where you keep your collection for a wholesale plundering to have taken place there in safety."

The old man grunted ungraciously. Evidently he was loth to admit that he owed any further obligation to the nephew he disliked so much.

"The jade got at some very good things in the other rooms though," snapped he. "There's a

valuable clock missing from one of the bedrooms, and some old silver."

"Well, if you'll let me go down to their place, as I was on the point of doing," said his nephew, making for the door as he spoke, "I may be in time to prevent their leaving the island till they've disgorged."

But the old man thrust out one hand imperiously.

"No, not you," cried he, sharply. "You stay here. Olwen, send one of the servants for Jean, and tell *him* to go down to the cottage. They may take the silver and the clock, but I should like to see this iron box that so much fuss has been made about. Tell him to bring that back and let the rest go."

Both his nephew and Olwen were surprised by these directions, which the girl proceeded dutifully to carry out, leaving the room for that purpose. Young Bayre, not quite knowing what to do, remained waiting for his uncle to speak, and finding himself apparently forgotten by the old gentleman, sat down near the window to wait for fresh developments. He was as much interested as his uncle in this matter of the Vazons' escape, which, since they were certainly in some sort accomplices of the old man, might lead at last to a solution of the mystery that certainly surrounded him.

It seemed a long time that he sat there, moving from time to time, just sufficiently, as he thought, to remind his uncle that he was still in the room. But never a word did the old man speak, and the

only sign of life he gave was the movement he made from time to time to stroke the head of the dog who rested at his feet.

In the circumstances it seemed a very, very long time before Olwen's voice was heard outside, and opening the door, she admitted not only herself but a sturdy-looking man in a blouse, whom young Bayre had seen at work in the grounds.

This person, it appeared, was Jean. Old Mr. Bayre raised his head with sudden and vivid interest.

"Well?" he asked sharply.

Jean replied in French, in gruff tones.

"They're gone, m'sieu," he said. "The Vazons have left Creux."

The old man sank back in his chair and there was dead silence for a few moments. Jean looked at Olwen, then at young Bayre, and shrugged his shoulders.

"*Ma foi,*" he said shortly, "they were a good riddance. Old Vazon did little work, but he did plenty of grumbling. And as for Marie—" And he shrugged his shoulders again with a gesture signifying that he did not think much of her in any capacity.

And then, as nobody made any remark to him, Jean pulled his forelock to the company and shuffled out of the room and down the stairs.

Olwen became alarmed at the strange depression into which old Mr. Bayre appeared to have sunk, and going softly to his side, she leant over him and asked him how he was.

Opening his eyes, the old man caught sight of

his nephew and instantly pointed with a shaking finger to the door.

"Go away," he said in a hoarse voice. "Go at once. And let me never see your face again."

Weak as he was, he woke for the moment into such a passion of determination and resentment, as he uttered these words, that Olwen feared for the result if the object of his vehement prejudice should remain any longer under his roof. She therefore ran across the room to young Bayre, who had already opened the door to go out, and following him to the head of the stairs, held out her hand and said hurriedly,—

"Yes, yes, you had better go away at once. I'm not afraid of being left with him now that the Vazons are away. And I'll write to you; I'll be sure to write.

Already the old man's voice, harsh and broken, was calling to her to return to him. She looked up once, her great eyes full of light, kind, reluctant to let her good friend go.

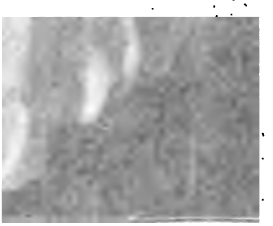
An answering light came into the young man's eyes. He retained her hand, drawing her towards him.

"Olwen, kiss me," he whispered.

For one moment she held back, but she yielded, and their lips met for the first time.

Then, as the old man's voice was heard again, she drew herself away and stole into the room, and the young man, staggering and feeling for the banisters, went slowly downstairs.

A minute later he was outside the house, walking at a rapid pace towards the Vazons' cottage.



AND THEIR LIPS MET.

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Jean, who was in the grounds near the mansion, had caught sight of him, and came up with him, panting, before he reached his destination.

"They were a bad lot, the pair of them," cried Jean, who was evidently highly delighted by the disappearance of father and daughter; "only for some reason or other there was no saying a word against them to old M. Bayre. Why, we could all have told him how Nini Portelet came over here one day when Marie had left monsieur's child alone in the cottage, and how she took it over to St. Luke's with her. It was when you and your friends were over here, monsieur, that it happened. And Marie didn't put herself out about it, but just borrowed the child of a St. Luke's fisherman, and got her money from old Monsieur Bayre as usual. Ah, they were a pair of beauties! She gave the child back to its mother yesterday, and I guessed somehow that they might be missing to-day. As a matter of fact, I know they crossed over to St. Luke's before it was light."

Bayre entered the deserted cottage, where the disordered state of the living-room spoke of a sudden departure. Among the displaced articles of furniture, not good enough to be worth any attempt to take away, there were certain signs, cynically left without disguise, of the robbery committed at the *château* on the previous night.

There was a tablecloth, heavily and handsomely fringed, in which, without doubt, some of the booty had been hastily wrapped up by Marie. There were a few plated articles which had been

inadvertently carried away with the silver. And there was the iron box about which so much fuss had been made.

Yes, lying bent and broken among the ashes on the hearth, after having evidently been forced open with a bent poker which lay near, was the very box which Marie had dropped out of the window to her father; and lying on the uneven tiles of the floor, at a little distance from it, was a heap of papers which Bayre at once judged to have been its contents.

He picked these up and began to examine them. To his astonishment and perplexity, the very first of these to attract his attention was one in which the words "my nephew and namesake Bartlett Bayre," were the first to catch his eye.

Further inspection proved this to be a will made and signed by his uncle only nine months previously, and in it he found that he himself was not only left a legacy of ten thousand pounds, but was appointed guardian of the testator's infant son and heir.

Bayre started to his feet, so much amazed at what he had read that for the moment he seemed scarcely able to think or even to see.

His uncle, only nine short months ago, had been so kindly disposed towards him that he had made him a handsome legacy! How then had it happened, unless indeed the old man's mind had become unhinged, that he had shown his nephew, from the first sight of him, nothing but aversion of the strongest kind?

The thing was so strange that Bayre could not trust himself to consider it thoroughly at that time. Hastily gathering up all the rest of the papers which he could find, he decided, after a moment's hesitation, not to take them back to the *château*, but to carry them with him to London, and to communicate with Olwen from there, telling her of his find, and asking her advice as to whether he should send them to her or to his uncle's solicitors.

They would, he thought, be better judges of his uncle's real state of mind than he could be; and in any case the will could not be of much value, as his uncle had undoubtedly altered his dispositions long since.

So utterly absorbed was he in the strange events which had happened, and in this last, perhaps the strangest discovery of all, that the journey to London seemed only half the length of the journey away from it.

He had sent no word as to the day he was returning, so that when he entered the sitting-room at the Diggings at ten o'clock at night he found Southerley and Repton smoking together by the fire, in a state of gloom and abstraction, and with the supper-table laid for only two.

"Hallo!" said Repton, sulkily. "You, is it?"

But Southerley only scowled and said nothing.

"Yes, it's me," replied Bayre, with ungrammatical cheeriness. "How are you, eh? Have you got any bottled stout? And how's the—"

But Repton sprang up with a yell and a tragic uplifting of the arm.

"Don't dare to pronounce that evil brat's name here," cried he, sepulchrally. "Unless you want to be chucked out of window."

"But why not?" persisted Bayre, who felt a redoubled interest in the child whose guardian it had certainly once been his uncle's intention that he should be.

Repton pointed to Southerley with a tragic forefinger.

"Ask *him!*" said he in a hollow voice.

Southerley growled a little, and then moved sulkily in his chair.

"Oh, the child's right enough, as children go, I suppose," said he. "The trouble of it is that Miss Merriman has grown so much attached to the wretched little animal that there's no talking to her, no getting her attention, no interesting her in anything but its miserable little mewlings and pukings."

"That's the worst of the domestic women you're so fond of, Bayre," went on Repton; "when there's a child about they won't pay the least attention to anything or anybody else. Whenever we go, as, of course, being two out of its three fathers, we're bound to go, to inspect the child, and see that it's properly fed and clothed and educated—" Bayre interrupted with a mocking laugh, but Repton went steadily and stodgily on: "Whenever we seek to do our duty, as I say, Miss Merriman makes fun of us, and says, 'Did its nice ickle papas tum to see if its bockle was too warm-warm?'

And such stuff as that. Now you're come back I hope you'll try to bring this young woman to reason, and—"

"I hope you won't try to do anything of the sort," growled Southerley in a saturnine manner from his chair. "That would be just the last straw, for you to interfere. For we know you like domestic women, and so no doubt you'd worm yourself into her confidence, and—"

"And we should be nowhere!" added Repton. "That's true."

"Certainly we're nowhere already," went on Southerley, meditatively. "I'm only hoping you'll be nowhere too!"

"You needn't trouble your heads about me," said Bayre, airily. "I've not the least wish to enter the lists, I assure you."

The words were scarcely out of his mouth when there was a soft knock at the door, and to the rage and consternation of two out of the three young men, beautiful Miss Merriman, who had not been once to the Diggings since Bayre went away, peeped into the room and smiled a gracious "How do you do?" to that fortunate young man.

"Oh, Mr. Bayre," cried she, sweetly, "could you come downstairs a moment? I have something to ask you about the little boy, and whether you've heard anything of his parents."

Bayre having, of course, expressed his ready assent, she retreated with a smile evenly distributed among them all, and left the three young men together. Repton made as if to stab the too lucky Bayre with the bread-knife.

"Villain," he said, "you deserve to die. But first you shall interview the lady, and we'll listen outside to see that you don't take a mean advantage of your visit to the baby's native haunts."

Southerley, who was more uneasy than Repton, looked up sullenly.

"Oh, let him go," said he, in a sort of despair. "May as well be put out of one's misery at once. Go and ask her to marry you, and for goodness' sake, get it quickly over."

From which Bayre, as he went downstairs, with a brand-new suspicion concerning Miss Merriman in his mind, opined that poor Southerley was as false to his ideal of a woman of genius as the only possible lady-love as he, Bayre, was false to his.

CHAPTER XXI

PARENTS AND GUARDIANS

BAYRE found Miss Merriman in the dining-room, which, with a woman's taste, she had managed to make very pretty. The shabby leather sofa was covered by a piece of handsome tapestry of subdued tints, and the cottage piano stood out from the wall in the modern manner, adorned with a handsome embroidered back, and with a vase of flowers on one corner.

There was a work-basket, too, in the room, and there was a most dainty cot, in which the baby boy lay asleep.

The gas was not alight, but a little table lamp, with a pretty shade, was standing on a small table which had a woman's work upon it, too far from the cot for the light to fall upon the sleeping infant.

"I thought you'd like to see him," said Miss Merriman, as she bent over the cot, looking a very Juno in her plain dress of navy serge, cut just low enough at the neck to show the full beauties of a suberb white throat.

But it was not so much her physical beauty which attracted Bayre as a certain tender look in her eyes which he thought amounted to self-betrayal.

With a certain air of unaccustomed responsibility the young man said, watching her the while,—

"Yes, indeed. I have very strong reasons for wishing to see the little chap. I've found out something about him."

She looked up quickly, anxiously.

"Ah!"

"I've found out, I think beyond a doubt, that he's not only my first cousin, but that I'm his guardian."

The answer which this announcement drew from the lady would have been surprising enough but for Bayre's own suspicions.

"His guardian! He can't have a guardian till his father's dead?"

Bayre took her quickly upon her words.

"Who is his father, then?" he asked.

She bit her lip, feeling that she had betrayed herself.

"How should I know?" said she. "I meant only that neither you nor anyone else can be guardian to the child until you can prove that he's an orphan. *Is* he an orphan?"

"I think not," said Bayre, rather dryly. And then he added, after a pause: "Would you like me to say what I think?"

A look of fear came into her great ox eyes. She grasped the rail of the cot firmly for a few moments, and then said, in a very dignified and touching manner, "I think, if you want to do your best for the child—and I'm sure that you do —you had better say as little as possible till you know more than you do."

"Very well," said he, gently.

There was a pause, and then she said, in a very low voice, "I'm glad you've come back. It was getting rather difficult for me. Those two friends of yours, good fellows, dear fellows, but—"

"Well?"

"They don't know, and they don't guess, and it makes things difficult."

"Do you want them to guess?" asked Bayre.

"No, no," cried Miss Merriman, quickly. "I don't want anyone to guess anything, not even *you*. And you must remember that I've made no admissions, none whatever. I've taken care of this child, who has three fathers and no mother, purely out of good-nature. You understand?"

"I do."

"But you'll tell your friends, won't you?—and especially Mr. Southerley, who has been very kind"—and Miss Merriman looked down with a heightened color—"that while I'm most grateful to them I feel that they are doing more than they ought. I don't want their flowers; I don't want their sweets. They're spending a fortune in things of that sort just because they look upon me as a disinterested philanthropist, which I'm not, who has taken charge of this child from abstract motive of kindness—which I've not."

Bayre looked at the sideboard indicated by the lady, and there he saw such a fine show of flowers, and of bon-bons in elegant wrappers, as would have set up a florist or confectioner in business in a small way.

He looked at her and smiled.

"They've been so very lavish," he said, "that one wonders whether it was all gratitude, or something else, which prompted such profusion."

Miss Merriman's beautiful face puckered into lines of distress.

"That's just what I'm afraid of," admitted she, sadly. "I don't mind with Mr. Repton; he's very nice, but he takes things lightly, doesn't he? But Mr. Southerley—"

Her voice faltered, and Bayre began to look rather grave.

"Shall I hint to him that there's—an obstacle?" asked he, in a low voice.

But she refused emphatically.

"Certainly not. How can you say there's an obstacle when you know nothing whatever about me except that I've good-naturedly relieved you all of a burden?" she said firmly. "No. What I want you to do is to tell them that—that—"

"I'll tell them that you're engaged to be married," said Bayre, with a happy thought. "That will put an end to any aspirations either of them might have without letting them into any secrets."

"You don't know any of my secrets," retorted Miss Merriman, sharply.

Bayre gave her one look and then bowed without speaking.

She had to be content with that; for although she began to interrogate him quickly as to what he knew, or guessed, she changed her mind before he could make any reply, and telling him

haughtily that he could invent what he pleased about her, she let him go.

Bayre felt himself to be in a difficulty. Certainly he did not know very much of absolute knowledge, but he could guess a good deal; and if his suspicions were correct there was an end to Southerley's hopes. Between a chivalrous wish to respect the secret of a lady, a secret, too, which he could not be said to have more than guessed at, and his wish to spare his friend the pain of useless longing, Bayre found himself placed in a dilemma.

The consequence was that when he re-entered the common sitting-room there was just enough uneasiness discernible in his look and manner to fill both his friends with anxiety.

Of course this anxiety took an insulting form.

"Well, have you cut us out?" asked Repton mockingly, looking at him askance from his arm-chair.

"Not that I know of," said Bayre, quietly.

"What did she want you for?" growled Southerley in a dictatorial tone.

"Oh, to ask if I had found out anything about the child, of course."

"And have you?"

"I think so. It's my uncle's child, and my first cousin, I have every reason to believe."

"Then," cried Repton, springing up in the delight of an interesting discovery, "we've only got to wring its neck for you and you'll be heir to all the old gentleman's property!"

"I don't know so much about that," said Bayre

laughing. "At the same time I'm awfully grateful to you for the suggestion that you're so ready to oblige me."

"Oh, well," said Repton, 'it cuts two ways, you know. Of course you'd have to keep Southerley and me out of the proceeds, and handsomely too. I'd let you off with a yacht and a cottage at Deal. But I don't know what Southerley might want; a house in Park Lane, perhaps, to live in when he'd married Miss Merriman."

"Hold your tongue, you fool!" said Southerley, in a deep bass voice.

"Well," said Repton, "I know you won't be satisfied unless you do marry her. I never saw any fellow so gone on any woman as you are on her. The way the conversation finds its way round to Miss Merriman every ten minutes, even if it starts at the differential calculus—(it never does, by-the-bye, and I haven't the remotest idea what the differential calculus is)—is perfectly sickening."

"What rot!" growled Southerley, with a restless turn in his chair.

Bayre looked at him out of the corners of his eyes.

"I hope that's not true," said he, "for I happen to know that she's engaged."

Southerley started to his feet.

"How do you know?" he asked angrily. "How should you know more than we do about it? unless—"

Repton took up his speech when he dropped it.

"By Jove!" cried he, "unless you're engaged to her yourself?"

Although Bayre excused himself with vehemence, showed them the absurdity of the suggestion seeing that he had met the lady less often than they had, yet he did not feel sure that he succeeded in convincing them. And there remained a certain shadow over the intercourse of the three during the next few days. One reason for this was his extreme reticence about his visit to the islands. He did not say enough about anything or anybody to satisfy their minds. He was not engaged to Miss Eden, so he said; he was not reconciled to his uncle. On the whole, Repton and Southerley were of opinion that he was either a liar or that he had wasted his time. So that he had more time to himself than usual during the next few days, and he made use of it to devour at his leisure the manuscript novel Olwen had entrusted to his care.

As he read sympathetically, of course, two things became manifest to him. The one was that the olive-skinned hero with the brown eyes and the wavy black hair had been inspired by the girl's conception of himself; and the other was that, amid all the traces of girlish inexperience and inexpertness with which the tale abounded, there was yet a saving grace, a charm of vivacity and of freshness which, as he was old enough to know, are the commonest marks of real ability in a beginner.

The first discovery touched him the most. But

the second had a pathetic interest also; for he recognized the fact that, with all her disadvantages as compared with himself in the way of actual experience of life, there was something in the girl's manuscript which his own more solid productions lacked, a something which made it not improbable that he would be more successful in disposing of her work than he was in disposing of his own.

Full of his impressions of her tale, he sat down to write to her on the third day after his return to town. He treated the matter of the novel very guardedly indeed; spoke well of it, warned her not to be too hopeful, remarked that her hero, while not unheroic, was very unlike a real man. Thus Bayre thought he would put her off the scent of his own intuition that the hero was meant for his own portrait. He added that he did not despair of selling the work, and that he would set about it at once. But she must not expect to set up a carriage out of the proceeds.

And then he turned to graver matters. Suspecting her complicity in the abduction of his infant cousin, and resenting her want of confidence in him over the matter, he said nothing about the child and nothing about Miss Merriman. But he told of his discovery of the broken iron box and its contents, and of the will which his uncle had made eight months previously. He asked her advice as to whether he should send these papers to her for his uncle, or to Mr. Bayre's solicitors. Perhaps she, he said, was in a better position

than he to decide whether old Mr. Bayre was in a fit state to be troubled with matters of business. For he reminded her that the old gentleman was evidently suffering from weakness of memory, as he had professed to have no remembrance whatever of the iron box.

He did not deny that he had read enough of the will to learn, to his surprise, how differently his uncle had thought of him a few months before, but he admitted that the document could have none but a sentimental interest now.

"If only," went on poor Bayre, "he had continued in the same mind towards me, perhaps some day I might have been able to offer you something better than love in a villa one-brick-thick. However, I don't mean to give up hope. Heaven keep you out of the way of another Monsieur Blaise! Remember, you have promised to write. So keep your promise unless you want me to throw up my berth here and come over again to find out why you don't. Yours,

BARTLETT BAYRE."

He was finishing this letter in his own room, by the light of a couple of inferior candles, when there came a thump at the door, and without waiting for permission Southerley put his head in.

"Hallo, what's up?" asked Bayre, perceiving that the usually somewhat phlegmatic red face of the stalwart pressman was the color of whitey-brown paper, and that his eyes had an unusual look.

"May I come in?" asked Southerley, hoarsely,

when he was well inside and had shut the door carefully behind him. "I want to ask you something." Then his eyes fell on the letter, which Bayre was elaborately trying to hide with a transparent assumption of carelessness. "You're writing letters, I see?"

Bayre tried to look as if he had forgotten the fact.

"Miss Eden?" went on Southerley in a mysterious voice.

"H'm," nodded Bayre, shamefacedly.

It is a humiliating thing to have it found out that you are over head and ears in love with a woman! But Southerley took it very nicely.

"That's all right!" he said with a sigh of relief in proportion to his size.

"What do you mean?"

"Why, look here. I haven't been quite sure that you were not sweet upon the girl downstairs. But you wouldn't be carrying on with both of them at once, now, would you?"

"Good heavens, no, man! And how do you know that either of them would so much as look at me?"

Southerley sighed again and wiped his face.

"Oh, well, well, women are odd creatures!" he observed frankly. "Anyhow, since you've given me your word it's all right I—I want you to do something for me."

"Well, what?"

Southerley began to pant heavily as he sat with his hands on his knees on one of Bayre's boxes.

"I want you to propose for me to Miss Merriman."

"Good heavens, man, are you mad?"

"Something very like it, sometimes since I've seen so much of that girl," said the giant, slowly. "I can't tell you the effect she has upon me."

"Effect! Rubbish! Haven't you often said your ideal of woman is a gen—"

"Oh, woman of genius be blowed!" cried Southerley, impatiently. "One says those things before one's hit, just because one must always be talking of women, even if it's only talking balderdash. But I tell you it's serious with me now. I must know how she feels, I must, I must."

"But haven't I told you—" began Bayre.

"Told me fiddlesticks! You've said she's engaged. Well, somehow I don't believe she is. She wears no ring. Besides, how should you know? She didn't tell you in so many words she was engaged, did she?"

"N-n-no," admitted his friend.

"Has she ever said she cared about anybody?"

"N-n-no."

"Then you just go and ask her this minute if she can care for me!"

And Southerley plunged across the room, hauled his friend out of his chair and flung him at the door. There Bayre, however, planted himself, and protested,—

"If you must be such a confounded fool as to want to propose to her after what I've told you," said he, surlily," why don't you do it yourself?"

"Because I can't," gasped the timid little lad of six feet three in a deep bass voice. "Look here, do you think I haven't tried? I've been down those blessed stairs four times this evening! Four times, mind you, and I've got as far as the door, and I've heard her singing to that brat. And I tell you the sound of her voice made me feel so queer that I couldn't go in, because I knew the words would stick in my throat and I should make a fool of myself."

"You *are* bad!" remarked Bayre, critically, as he contemplated the giant's moist face.

"Well, get on, if you don't want to be kicked downstairs," retorted Southerley, beginning to get irritated by his friend's unaccountable perverseness.

Bayre raised his eyebrows and turned slowly.

"It won't be of any use," said he, as he opened the door and went downstairs.

CHAPTER XXII

A RUNAWAY

BAYRE felt very nervous over his errand, and when Miss Merriman cried "Come in," in answer to his knock, he was almost as awkward as Southerley himself would have been, and she gave him a searching look as he crossed the room like a sly schoolboy.

She was sitting near the fire, and the baby, in a state of great glee, was turning out the contents of her work-basket on the rug at her feet. Bayre felt that he was called upon to explain his appearance with promptitude.

"I hope I'm not disturbing you," he said, "but I've been sent here by—by somebody else—by Southerley, in fact, with a message which I hardly dare to give."

Before he was half-way through the speech the lady had looked away; and from the expression of her face he could guess that she had an uneasy suspicion as to the nature of his errand.

"Then why give it," said she, quickly, in a slightly tremulous voice, "if it's of no use, and if it's painful to you?"

"Because I must; because I've promised. Forgive me if I'm clumsy over it. The fact is the fellow's lost his head; I think perhaps he

knows there's not much hope for him; I myself have told him there's not. But he persists in hoping, hoping, or rather he's got into such a state that he can't rest till he's got a definite answer, even if it's the wrong one. He's in love with you, head over ears in love, and he wants to know if you could ever care for him."

Although he knew that she must have guessed what was coming, Miss Merriman pretended to feel surprised. But it was a poor, worried sort of pretence, without either nature or sincerity.

"Why, it's absurd," she said quickly. "What does he know of me? I never heard anything so ridiculous."

And then there was a short pause, during which she sat very still.

"You're not offended?" said Bayre, gently.

"Offended!" She just got out the word and then broke down into a flood of tears.

Bayre was appalled. To see a woman cry was a dreadful thing at any time; but to feel that he had opened the floodgates himself, and when he ought to have known better, was a thought of unspeakable horror.

"Forgive me," he said hoarsely. "And don't, oh, *don't!* You make me feel a brute, and yet I couldn't help myself. I'll tell him—I'll go and tell him—" He was flying to the door, impelled thereto not only by the woman's tears but by the yells of the small child, who was on his feet by Miss Merriman's knee, screaming in sympathy after the manner of his kind.

Miss Merriman recovered sufficiently to speak.

"No," she cried imperiously. "Don't tell him anything. You're not to tell him anything. Let him think what he likes until—"

"Until what?"

"Never mind."

She waved her hand in farewell without looking at him, and Bayre made his way reluctantly enough upstairs, where he found Southerley in waiting on the half-landing.

"No good, of course?" said the big man, trembling like a leaf.

Bayre shook his head.

"Any reason?"

"No. Sorry. I did my best."

Southerley took it very quietly; he just nodded and went upstairs softly whistling, with his hands in his pockets. Then he went out at once, without seeing either of the others again, and he did not come back until long after they were both in bed.

And he alone of the three made no remark whatever when Susan informed them on the following evening that Miss Merriman had gone away and had taken the child with her.

Repton gave a long whistle.

"Well, I'm blest!" he exclaimed tersely.

Bayre was indignant. Surely he had a right to know where she was taking the child, he who claimed not only to be the infant's cousin but to have more than a fanciful claim to be its guardian! Miss Merriman was surely carrying a woman's privileges too far.

"Cousin or no cousin, it's abominable," said

Repton, indignantly. "We've had all the trouble of the journey from Guernsey, all the expense of milk and biscuits, sausage rolls and bananas for the brat, and flowers and sweets for her. And now we're left in the lurch like this! It's infamous. I'm hurt in my very tenderest feelings. I shall advertise."

"What! For the price of the flowers and the bon-bons?" laughed Bayre.

"Of course not. But I have a third share in the proprietorship of that infant. And it may be worth money some day. Besides, I ought to have been consulted."

All this time Southerley never moved a muscle. But that he was hard hit it was impossible not to see. His eyes looked glassy and his ruddy skin livid.

"Cheer up, old man!" cried Repton, giving him a ferocious thump on the back. "She wasn't worth troubling about, a woman who could go without a word after that last box from Fuller's—the one with the gold ribbon and the picture of the two cupids in a basket. Thank goodness, she'll never be able to look at those two pink cupids without a self-reproachful thought of you and me!"

But even this thought did not appear to have a consoling effect upon Southerley, who shook him off impatiently and went out again without a word.

"Fool!" cried Repton, contemptuously, "to care so much for a woman who didn't care two pins about him."

But Bayre, who remembered Miss Merriman's tears, was less harsh in his judgment.

"I have an idea," said he, slowly, "that she didn't *dare* to care!"

But he would not proffer any solution of this enigmatic remark.

And before the day was out he had something to divert his attention in the shape of a letter from Miss Eden.

A surprising letter it was, and tantalizing, too, for it was evidently written in a sort of breathless way, while the writer was at a white heat of emotion, and it told him just enough to make him want to know more.

It was as follows:—

"DEAR MR. BAYRE,—I got your letter. I have said nothing about it. I think you had better keep the papers yourself for a little while—those, I mean, that you found in the iron box. I will write to you again in a day or two, perhaps. I am afraid this letter is disjointed, but I have had a sort of shock, and I have not got over it yet. Do not be alarmed; we are all well here, or as well as you could expect, remembering the state in which you left us all. The Vazons have not come back and we have heard nothing more of them. We think they must be still in the islands, but they are not at Creux. Nini has come to stay here; she is a trustworthy girl, and I am very glad to have her, for I should not like to be here quite alone.

"Now I am going to tell you something which

will surprise you. I have found out who the woman is shut up here. I cannot tell you more now, except this—that she is not here against her will.—Yours sincerely,

"OLWEN EDEN."

Bayre was on thorns to know more, and he could not understand why, having told him so much, she could not have trusted him with the whole of the secret. Was it something she did not like to trust to paper? Was it his young wife whom old Mr. Bayre was keeping concealed at the *château*. And if so, was she in her right mind?

He wrote at once, begging Olwen to let him know more, but yet expressing himself guardedly, for fear the letter should fall into other hands than hers.

He could not rest for thinking about this, wondering whether his uncle knew of the discovery made by Olwen, and whether, in that case, he would make any difference in his treatment of her.

His anxiety grew as day after day passed and no answer came to his second letter. He could not get another holiday or he would have gone back to Creux without delay. In his distress he thought of writing to Madame Nicolas, his landlady at St. Luke's, to ask whether she had heard anything of old Mr. Bayre and his household.

The good woman answered almost by return of post, but the information she had to give was

exceedingly vague, and was rather in the nature of gossip than of anything definite.

She had not seen old Monsieur Bayre lately, neither had anyone she knew. But she had heard that he was ill, that there had been changes in his household, and that the young lady had gone away to London and was singing somewhere under the name of Señora Pia, or some such title. As Madame Nicolas did not even mention the Vazons by name, it seemed probable that they had kept quiet and had not made any attempt to turn the tables upon their late master.

This letter, vague as it was, filled Bayre with anxiety and distress. He knew there must be some foundation for this story about Olwen, and it tallied too well with her silence for him to neglect the clue.

"Singing in London under the name of Señora Pia!" This was vague indeed. He seized the newspapers and studied their columns with eager scrutiny. But it was not until the third day after the receipt of this letter that, after having read on the first page of the *Daily Telegraph* all the names of all the ladies and gentlemen who were advertised in the music publishers' announcements as singing songs in different parts of England, the name "Signora Beata" attracted his attention and made him decide to set off that very evening on what might be a wild-goose chase after all.

"Signora Beata" was to sing "Those Sweet, Sweet Eyes of Thine" and another ballad with an

equally vapid title at the Bromley Institute. And as it was not very far away, Bayre thought it worth while to take the journey on this very slender clue.

The hall was crowded. Bayre got a programme and found that Signora Beata did not appear before the fourth number in the programme. He had to sit through a new loyal song, rendered lustily by the baritone but conspicuous for its loving adhesion to one note. He had to hear a glee, and he had to endure a recitation.

Then came the turn of number four, and it was as much as he could do not to start out of his seat with surprise when Signora Beata appeared and proved to be, not indeed Olwen Eden, but another old friend in the person of Miss Merriman.

She looked magnificent in a dress of cream satin, which showed off her beautiful neck and the exquisite poise of her head to great advantage. She wore no jewels, but half-a-dozen roses of different colors were arranged on the front of her dress, and another was placed upright on one side of her head and worn as an aigrette. Long white suède gloves completed the costume, and Bayre thought that he had never seen so beautiful a woman, and was glad Southerley was not there to have his chains further riveted.

He became quite anxious to hear her sing, and was not in the least surprised at the burst of applause which greeted her as soon as she came to the front of the platform. It seemed to him that if her voice proved to be as superb

as her appearance she was wasting herself at Bromley.

But with the first bars of the song came not exactly disenchantment, but a decidedly modified appreciation of the beauty's art. She had a good voice, not in the first rank, but pleasant to listen to; the weakness of her performance lay in the fact that her voice had not been sufficiently cultivated, and that she was possessed by an overpowering nervousness which, while it rather added to her charm as a woman, decidedly marred her efforts as a singer.

In brief, she had, though singing as a "professional," scarcely got beyond the stage of "gifted amateur."

But her beauty, her modesty, her statuesque grace, carried all before them, and the audience applauded her as if she had been Patti herself.

Bayre began now to understand that Madame Nicolas had mixed up in her mind what she had heard about one woman with what she had heard about another, and he resolved, now that he was in for it, to run Signora Beata to earth.

He found the rest of the concert tedious, except when the beauty was on the platform, and as soon as her last appearance on the programme was made he slipped out of his seat and went outside to wait for her.

She fled out of the building so quickly and so quietly, however, that he was not able to speak to her, and he got into the same train, but not into the same carriage, and then when

he had seen her enter an omnibus he got on the top of the vehicle, determined to track her down.

She alighted finally at that part of London which used to be known as Brompton, but which has since, by the profuse use of the name "Egerton" instead of the older and homelier ones, purged away the Brompton taint and become something far higher in the social scale.

Here Bayre followed the lady into a side street where little cards over the door announced "Apartments," and at one of these she stopped and proceeded to open it with a latch-key.

Bayre stopped too at the foot of the steps and looked up.

She heard the footsteps stop and looked round quickly. An exclamation broke from her lips.

"You've followed me!" she cried.

"Yes—Signora."

She started, hesitated, then shut the door again and came down the steps.

"Why have you done this?" she said passionately.

"Why have you run away, without a word, with *my* cousin, my ward, Miss Merriman?"

"Your ward!" She laughed derisively. "Don't talk nonsense. You know that that is a mere farce. You know well enough that I'm his mother."

"Yes, and you're something else," replied Bayre, coolly. "You're *my aunt*, Mrs. Bartlett Bayre."

She met his eyes, and then looked down; but she made no attempt to contradict him.

"Come inside," she said suddenly, "and we can talk better. You must know everything now."

CHAPTER XXIII

A PHOTOGRAPH

BAYRE followed Miss Merriman into the house, and into the little ground-floor sitting-room, where she turned up the gas and showed the folding doors open into the adjoining room, where a maid sat reading a novelette by the light of a candle besides the baby's cot.

"Wait here a moment, I always go and kiss my baby the moment I come in; nothing can interfere with that ceremony," she said, with a pretty defiance which Bayre liked.

And as she disappeared through the folding-doors, which she shut after her, her attitude seemed to say that now she had once owned that that baby was hers she would brandish him in the eyes of the world and snap her fingers at destiny.

Bayre heard the soft whisperings of the two women, the mysterious cooings and cawings they made over the sleeping child. And when Miss Merriman swept majestically back into the room again, dressed in a plain grey tea-gown, with one of her roses pinned in it, he remembered his old ideal of the simple, domestic-minded woman, and he sympathized with Southerley's adoration of this beautiful creature.

"Now," she said defiantly, "perhaps you'll explain why you have followed me, why you have come."

Bayre was rather amused, and rather resentful.

"You must remember," said he, "that whatever suspicions I may have had concerning your relationship to the child, all that I absolutely knew was that he was my uncle's son, and that therefore it was a personal duty of mine to know what became of him. My friends too, Repton and Southerley—" She interrupted him with a quick gesture.

"Surely," she said, panting a little, "you can't pretend they have a right to know anything whatever about me!"

She was standing on one side of the table and Bayre was on the other. He leaned upon it to look earnestly into her face.

"Indeed I do," he retorted. "I say that Southerley at least has a right to know that you are a married woman, and I say that it is not fair to him to conceal the fact."

"How—not fair?" said the lady, sinking into a chair and speaking in quite a timid and subdued voice. "How could I know that—that it mattered to him?"

"I think," said Bayre, still leaning on the table, though she made a gesture to invite him to be seated, "that women know those things sooner than the men themselves. It seems to me that you must have seen what his feelings were, and his hopes; and though I know women do these cruel things and think little of them, yet I'm sorry

that you, a member of my family and the mother of that child, should be so heartless."

"Heartless! I'm not that," replied Miss Merriman.

And as she looked up with the tears raining down her face, Bayre felt compunction at his own severity.

"Forgive me," he said. "I suppose I have no right to speak like this. But surely you might have trusted us. Don't you think so?"

Miss Merriman was silent for a few moments, wiping her eyes quietly and sobbing a little. Then she seemed suddenly to make up her mind to a great effort, and looking up, she pointed to a chair and said, peremptorily,—

"Sit down. You shall not scold me without hearing a word in my defence. I begin to think you're as hard, as impossible, as your uncle himself."

Bayre sat down. He was longing to hear something of the strange story she had to tell, and was quite ready to admit that all the fault of his uncle's unhappy marriage had not been on the side of the wife.

"Now you've been to Creux—" she began. "You've been there twice, and you've seen your uncle, have you not?"

"Yes."

"Well, do you think he is the sort of man to make a young wife happy?"

"Emphatically no," admitted Bayre, promptly. "But surely you could see that before you married him?"

The poor lady clasped her hands and looked at him rather dismally.

"Do you know," she asked earnestly, "the sort of life a girl leads among poor and proud relations who don't always take the trouble to hide that she's a burden upon them, even though they won't consent to her trying to earn her own living? Well, if you can imagine that, you know the position I was in when I met your uncle and when he asked me to be his wife. There wasn't even a question of my refusing: it was taken for granted by everybody that it was a splendid thing for me, and when I ventured to suggest that, being thirty or forty years older than I, he was rather old for me, I was looked upon as a monster of ingratitude for finding any fault. So we were married, and until we got to Creux it was bearable enough. I was a new toy, and he was kind to me. I was grateful too, really," she insisted with pathetic earnestness.

"Of course, of course, I'm quite sure you were," said Bayre, gently.

The lady went on,—

"But when we once got back to Creux, life became almost intolerable at once, and all from the same cause—his cousin, Miss Ford."

"Of course she wouldn't approve of his marriage," said Bayre.

"But she had no right to be jealous, vindictive, cruel," urged Miss Merriman. "After all, her cousin had a right to marry, and she was provided for, for she had a little money of her own. But she was a perfect monster of avarice, and when

my baby was born and she knew that he would have her cousin's property she became so outrageously rude and harsh to me that I could not and would not bear it."

"Did my uncle allow it?" asked Bayre, wondering whether the strange degeneration in his uncle had begun some time back.

"He didn't see all of it," said she. "Miss Ford was very artful, and she assumed to me when we were by ourselves an overbearing tone which she never used in your uncle's presence. When I told him about this, and protested, he professed that I was exaggerating, making mountains out of mole-hills. And as my influence over him, such as it was, dwindled away directly we got back into the neighborhood of this old cousin, you may imagine how all these scenes ended. He gradually took her part more and more, and blamed me for the uncomfortable life we all led. You see this Miss Ford had been his housekeeper for many years, and she was a very clever woman. Did you never see her?"

"Never. She died, you know, last year, before I ever went to Creux."

"Ah, yes, yes!"

"Now that was just after you ran away, wasn't it? When she was dead why didn't you go back to your husband and child?" asked Bayre, gently.

"I wanted to, oh, I wanted to," cried poor "Miss Merriman," down whose cheeks the tears were again falling. "I should never have run away but for her."

"How did it happen?" asked Bayre. "Will you tell me? I don't ask out of curiosity, of course, but in the hope that I may be able to do something. Perhaps I could patch up this quarrel—not by myself, for my uncle can't bear the sight of me, but through Miss Eden."

"Ah! Miss Eden! What is she like?"

"You've never seen her?"

"Never."

"But you've been in correspondence with her," said Bayre. "I think I can guess that it was by arrangement with her that 'Miss Merriman' happened to be at hand when three poor travellers returned to town in charge of some particularly lively luggage!"

She looked down.

"I wonder you didn't guess before," she said dryly. "Women are not so ready to undertake the care of other people's children as I was to undertake the care of my own!"

"Yet you left Creux without him," said Bayre.

"Not by own wish," said she, looking up with flashing eyes. "I was tricked by Marie Vazon. When life grew too intolerable for me at the *château*, and I made up my mind to run away with my baby, I was obliged to take Marie into my confidence. She pretended to sympathize with me, crossed over with me and the baby to St. Luke's to catch the boat for Southampton, and then when I was on board preparing a cozy place for him in the cabin downstairs, she stole off the boat with my

little one and left me to go away without him."

The remembrance of the trick which had broken her heart when it was played upon her brought fresh tears into the mother's eyes.

"They were artful customers, those Vazons," said Bayre; "when you found you had been deceived, had you no thought of trying to get back?"

She nodded emphatically.

"He wouldn't take me back. It was his cousin's fault, of course. I wrote and I wrote, and I begged and I begged, but it was of no use. And when I knew his cousin was dead I wrote again to him and also to Miss Eden. From him I got no answer. From Miss Eden I got a sweet, womanly letter telling me she'd tried her best for me but that he simply wouldn't hear her."

Remembering his uncle's wooden countenance, and the blank look with which he listened to anything he didn't want to hear, Bayre could quite understand this.

He rose to go with a grave face.

"It's an unhappy business," said he. "I wish I could do something. If I can, will you let me know?"

She rose too, with a strange look of unsatisfied longing in her great eyes.

"You are very good, very kind," said she. And then she paused. "I like to think of your kindness, and of that of those two others. You must forgive me for running away; there were some things I couldn't bear."

Bayre felt the blood rising to his face.

"You mean—Southerley?" he said in a very low voice.

She made an impatient gesture.

"Oh, no, no, no, I don't mean anything," she said restlessly. "What should Mr. Southerley matter to me, a married woman? You say strange things, Mr. Bayre."

He smiled at her pretty petulance.

"Well," said he, "of course it would be too desperately wicked of you, Mrs. Bayre, to see anything attractive enough to endanger your peace of mind in any man but Mr. Bayre—"

He paused upon the name, and she suddenly looked up at him with an unaccustomed light of humor in her eyes. And when their eyes met they both laughed outright.

"After all," said she, desperately, "why should I deny it to you? Why should I not acknowledge that I *did* find something in this handsome young friend of yours which made me feel that it would be wiser not to see him again? I'm very human, I'm afraid. And—my life has not been a very happy one. Where's the harm of owning that I'm only a woman, especially when I'm trying, trying hard, hard to be an honorable and good one—for my child's sake!"

Bayre could not answer, but he nodded ferociously two or three times in sympathetic assent.

"Now," said she, "you must go. Already my landlady, who knows me as the pink of discretion, will be wondering who you are."

"That's all right," said Bayre, smiling. "Tell her the truth. Tell her I'm your nephew."

At that her youth got the better of her and she burst out laughing.

"The truth will not always bear to be told," said she. "In this case I'm sure I shall not venture it."

Before he reached the door she rushed to the mantelpiece and took from it a large unframed photograph of herself in the dress she had worn on the concert platform that evening.

"Take this souvenir of your aunt," said she, demurely, "and write on it that it's a present to her dutiful nephew. Good-bye."

He wondered why she had given him the picture, and it was not until he had got half-way home that it occurred to him to think that perhaps she liked the thought that her picture, in all her brilliant beauty, should lie about the house where Southerley was.

He did not quite know whether this idea of his did the lady injustice; but he decided that, innocent as this little bit of coquetry might be, he would not risk fanning a hopeless flame in his friend's breast.

There was a sort of suspicion, however, in the faces of both Repton and Southerley when he got home and found them playing cribbage by the fire. They wanted to know where he had been, and said rude things when he wouldn't tell them. And then, as luck would have it, Southerley pounced into his bedroom when he had retired for the night, and found Signora Beata's

portrait stuck in his looking-glass, in front of which he was taking off his collar.

Southerley made for the portrait in a rage.

"Who's this?" roared he, as he seized the photograph, which Bayre in vain tried to intercept.

The owner of the picture took the bull by the horns.

"It's my aunt," shouted he, as he made a clutch at it.

"Aunt, be blowed! It's not. It's—it's—"

"It's the wife of my uncle and namesake, old Bartlett Bayre of Creux, and the mother of the child we brought over from St. Luke's a few weeks ago," said Bayre, deliberately.

The two young men looked each other straight in the face for a few moments.

Then Southerley tumbled into a chair, looking very queer about the eyes.

"Good lord! Do you mean it?"

"Rather."

CHAPTER XXIV

RECONCILIATION

SOUTHERLEY dropped his head into his hands. His friend said nothing. What could he say? He did not like the look of those two strong, nervous hands with the sinews standing up like cords. He began to hum to himself, and to make a clatter with his hair-brushes.

Then Southerley looked up abruptly, his face haggard and wet.

"She might have told me. She might have trusted me," he said hoarsely. "And I—if I hadn't been such a great chuckle-headed fool I might have known, I might have known."

Bayre was thankful to see that he took it so quietly.

"As to telling you," he said gently, "I dare say it was better not to. Poor thing! What could she do for the best but what she has done? Just get away without any fuss or any scenes, and try to forget you, as she ought. It's a hard case, an awfully hard case."

"I must see her, I must!" cried Southerley, starting up.

"Better not. I shan't help you, at any rate. I'm going to try to get her to go back to her husband."

"What!" bellowed Southerley. "To shut herself up with that unbearable old fossil, who—who—who—"

Bayre did not answer, for it suddenly occurred to him that there was a mystery about his uncle which he should like to have solved before attempting to bring about even the most half-hearted reconciliation.

Southerley was walking up and down the little room at a great rate.

"What good would it do," he asked, turning sharply, "to get her to shut herself up again with a man who's at least half a lunatic? You know very well I shouldn't say this if there were the least chance of a real reconciliation between them. But knowing what you do know about your uncle, you must feel as sure as I do that to shut these two unhappy creatures, the mother and the child, in the same house with him would only be to drive at least the woman into the same condition of half-wittedness that he has reached himself."

Bayre rubbed his head distractedly. He could not but have doubts of the same kind himself.

"Well, well, how do you know that it isn't the feeling that he's driven away his wife and child that has made my uncle what he now is?" suggested he.

"Rot," said Southerley, laconically.

This being Bayre's opinion also, he forbore to remonstrate with his friend upon his extremely vulgar retort.

"At any rate it would be better for her than to —to—to"

"To—to—to—what?"

"Well, to go about the world without anyone to take care of her. It's an awful position, you know, for a beautiful woman like that."

"I know it is. But after all, there's no reason why she should shut herself up and refuse to see her friends. I think it's a great pity she went away from here; I say it quite disinterestedly. After all, you are some sort of relation to her, you know—"

"Nephew," said Bayre, promptly.

Southerley made a gesture of impatience.

"At any rate, you have the same name. And —and—and we were interested in the child, you know, all of us. Now it's better for a boy—"

Bayre interrupted him by a burst of ironical laughter; and Southerley, who took things seriously, checked himself and withdrew, with the remark that he was not going to stay there to listen to his friend making a fool of himself.

But indeed Bayre's merriment had been of a hollow sort, for he felt the bitter irony of the situation quite as strongly as Southerley did.

It was two days after this that Bayre, who was in a state of greater anxiety than ever concerning Olwen, experienced a thrill of mingled emotions on finding a letter waiting for him on the sitting-room table. It was from Olwen, and it bore the St. Luke's postmark. It was very

short, and the hand-writing betrayed the agitation of the writer.

"DEAR MR. BAYRE:—I am writing against orders, but I feel that I ought and I must. I think your uncle is dying, but he will not see a doctor, though I sent for one on my own responsibility. If by any means you can come, I do earnestly beg you to do so.—Yours sincerely,

"OLWEN EDEN."

He knew that there was more involved than the death of his uncle; the very letter in his hands, short, almost curt, dry and barren of information as it was, showed that the writer had something to communicate too important to be told in a letter. At whatever cost, he felt that he should have to go back to Creux.

And then came another thought; his uncle's wife must know, and at once. So he put a copy of Olwen's letter upon paper, since he could not trust the epistle itself out of his hands, and enclosed it with a couple of lines to Signora Beata.

The next day was Friday, and having, not without difficulty, succeeded in getting two days' leave, Bayre came back to the Diggings soon after four to prepare for his journey on the morrow. He found Southerley in the sitting-room, and he told him briefly about the letter and his proposed journey.

"And," he added, "I've written to his wife."

"You mean Miss Merriman?"

"Yes, Miss Merriman, if you like. But remember, she is Mrs. Bayre—Mrs. Bartlett Bayre."

"I'm not likely to forget," said Southerley, walking up and down the room. "Will she go to him?"

"I don't know, but I should think so."

Southerley nodded, but said nothing, and Bayre left him and went upstairs.

And five minutes after, while Southerley was still pacing up and down like a bear in its cage, Susan opened the door and announced,—

"Miss Merriman!"

She was very pale, and the expression of her face was one of guilt and confusion. But if she was shy, Southerley was more so. He offered her that armchair the springs of which were in the least imperfect condition, and sat down himself on the most rickety of them all, tongue-tied, restless and bashful.

Miss Merriman was all in black, and the black spotted veil she wore increased the effect of her pallor.

"They told me Mr. Bayre was here," she said.

Southerley started as if he had never heard the name.

"Bayre! Oh, yes, yes. So he is, I believe. Shall I—shall I go and tell him?"

"I—I want to know," she said, in a tremulous voice, "whether he'll take me with him—to Creux. You know all about it, of course?"

From shyness poor Southerley rushed into rash confidence.

"Yes, I know. Why didn't you tell us before?

What reason had you for not letting us into your secret at first?"

He had shifted his seat uneasily, and was now sitting on the arm of his rickety chair, thumping the back of it nervously as he spoke.

She rose restlessly and stood near the fireplace.

"I didn't want you to know, I didn't want anybody to know. I was so afraid of losing my boy again. I lost him by a trick before as perhaps you know, perhaps Mr. Bayre told you. And so I hid my own name, for fear they might get to know at Creux that I had got my child back. Though I don't think they'd have cared. Isn't it wonderful—that they shouldn't have cared?"

It seemed to Southerley, now standing at the other corner by the mantelpiece, that the look of maternal love which shone in her eyes as she asked this question was the most beautiful expression he had ever seen on a woman's face.

"You mean that old Mr. Bayre didn't care?"

"Yes. Think of it! For weeks he never went near the cottage where he believed his child to be! Oh, I could have forgiven him everything but that!"

"You'll have to forgive him that too, now," said Southerley, with a sort of gruff gentleness.

She looked frightened.

"Oh, perhaps he's not really so ill," said she, in a whisper. "I don't want him to be ill."

She meant more than that, and Southerley understood the pangs in the woman's heart.

Even at the price of freedom for herself she did not want him to die.

"If he gets well you'll stay there, I suppose?" said Southerley, pulling himself together and trying to speak in the tone of a conveyancing clerk during business hours.

She looked scared.

"I—I suppose I shall have to, if he wishes it."

"But you don't want to?"

He had no business to say this, and he knew it. But the matter was so vitally interesting to him, he cared so deeply what became of her, that he found himself floundering into hopeless indiscretions of speech before he knew where he was.

She drew a long breath, stared in front of her and broke passionately into the truth.

"I can't want to, I can't, I can't. I've tried to want to, I've written saying I wanted to, but oh! it's too hard, it's too hard. I don't know why I'm telling you all this; you've no busniess to ask me such things, no business to listen to my answers. But I tell you there are some things one can't forget, some slights one can't forgive; and I was made to suffer, in little things, stupid things, but so deeply that the remembrance of it will never die out of my heart. There! I ought not to say this, especially now when he's ill: but it's true, and I can't help it."

"Poor thing!"

It was a most ludicrous appellation, and he knew it, as he looked sympathetically at the beautiful woman before him. But the words came

straight from his heart, and she was grateful. She smiled up at him through the tears which were gathering in her eyes.

"I'm glad you're sorry for me," said she ingenuously. "I'm sorry for myself. But I ought not to be: I ought to be spending my time being sorry for *him!* For after all, it must be very, very lonely for him—"

"But he seems to like loneliness," said Southerley, sharply.

"I don't suppose he does now he's ill!"

"Well, Miss Eden's there."

"Yes."

"What will you do with the boy? Shall you take him with you?" asked Southerley, anxiously.

"Not on that cold journey," she said with a sudden plaintiveness in her tone. "Besides, I'd rather know first how I'm going to be received myself!"

"Well, he can't be unkind to you now!"

It was evident that the recollection of former unkindness was still so strong in the unhappy woman that she shrank from the approaching ordeal.

"N-o-o-o," she said faintly, "and at any rate young Mr. Bayre will be there—"

"I wish to Heaven I were going to be there!" moaned Southerley.

She drew herself up, looking rather frightened.

"Oh, no, I'm glad you won't be!" she panted out.

"Why? Why?"

"Oh, he was horribly jealous if I—if anybody—"

And then she broke off, faltering, crimson, confused: but not more crimson, not more confused, not, alas! more delighted than was Southerley, who recognized in this little outburst the fact that the ill-used wife had noticed and had not been unmoved by his own clumsy, silent adoration.

But, if she had been for a moment indiscreet, she repented very quickly and very severely.

"I do wish Mr. Bayre would come!" she said with asperity, which smote her hearer to the heart.

Drawing instantly back like a snail into its shell, he made a clumsy dash for the door, and saying incoherently, "Oh, ah, yes, yes, I—I forgot —I—I'll tell him!" he fled out of the room and lumbered up the stairs.

Although she had been so anxious to see Bayre, Miss Merriman did not stay long discussing the journey with him; they arranged to meet at Paddington on the following morning, and, five minutes later, the beautiful visitor quitted the house, leaving the young men in a state of much excitement over the approaching event of the journey to Creux and its result.

"If that wretched old lunatic goes on living," observed Southerley, "I shall cut my throat."

But Bayre reprimanded him severely.

"You won't do anything so crazy," he retorted quietly. "You'll find a nice girl, not like Miss Mer—I mean my aunt, but like your own ideal, and you'll marry her and settle down happily with

her, and she'll write your articles for you and save the public from much inferior literature. And my aunt will settle down comfortably at Creux, with the boy and her husband—"

Before he could get any further with his harangue, however, the door of the room was violently slammed, and he found himself alone.

The next morning was cold and cheerless, and when Bayre met the lady at the station they both looked rather blue. Southerley had been forbidden by his friend to put in an appearance, but he insisted on sending some chocolates for her refreshment during the journey, in spite of Bayre's threat that he would represent them to be his own present.

The two travellers did very little talking, and Bayre could see the lady's handkerchief go furtively up to her eyes now and then, and he wondered what the thoughts were that brought the tears.

As soon as they landed at St. Luke's they got a boat to take them across to Creux, and on the way they learned that the popular notion was that old Monsieur Bayre was not long for this world, and that he was dying as he had lived, an eccentric recluse, refusing to see doctor or clergyman, and morose to the last.

The boatman who told them all this did not recognize the lady, who sat heavily veiled and simply dressed in black in the stern of the boat, and who said nothing whatever while the short voyage lasted.

But as Bayre helped her up the steep cliff

path she whispered to him, in a quavering voice,—

"I'm afraid; oh, I'm so dreadfully afraid!"

"Afraid of what?" said he, cheerily.

But she drew a deep breath and only faltered,—

"I—I think I don't quite know."

Before they reached the house they had to decide upon a plan of action, since both knew that old Mr. Bayre would never see his wife if her arrival were first formally announced to him. She must be smuggled in, undoubtedly. It was settled that Bayre should be spokesman, that she should follow him into the house without speaking and without raising her veil, and trust to luck to make her way unmolested.

Bayre expected to have the door shut in his face, so he prepared to make a dash for it and to force a way in if necessary.

It was a long time before anybody answered their summons, so long, indeed, that both began to be afraid that the door was not to be opened at all to them. Presently, however, they heard the sound of heavy steps inside, and the door was opened by Nini Portelet, who looked alarmed when she saw the visitors.

"You must let us in, please," said Bayre, gently forcing a passage for himself and his companion.

The girl muttered something below her breath, and mentioned Miss Eden's name.

"Yes, we should like to see her, please," said he, as they stood a moment in the hall.

"She is with monsieur. He is very ill," stammered Nini.

And as she spoke she glanced in the direction of the passage that led to the room where Bayre had seen his uncle on his last visit.

He took a bold step.

"Is he downstairs then?" asked he, at the same time walking in the direction of the lower room, and glancing at the lady to indicate that she was to follow him.

Nini got frightened.

"No, but—"

She attempted to get between the lady and the entrance to the passage, but Bayre was still more determined than she, and he said, in a voice of authority,—

"Don't interfere. We have important business here. We must pass."

The girl muttered something about her duty, then, suddenly perceiving that the contest was an unequal one, she uttered a low cry of terror, and disappeared into the passage that led to the servants' quarters.

Miss Merriman was trembling like a leaf, and he had to cheer and encourage her as he led her gently in the direction of his uncle's room.

"Come in," cried Olwen's voice when he knocked.

"I can't! Let me go back!" murmured Miss Merriman, in a choking voice.

But he insisted.

"No, no. Remember, it is your duty."

He turned the handle, and holding her firmly by the arm, led her into the room.

The old man was not in bed. He was sitting huddled up as usual in his armchair by the little

wood fire that burned in the grate, and Olwen, who sat at a little distance, held a book in her hand, as if she had been reading to him.

It was she who caught sight of the visitors first, and guessing at once who the veiled lady was, she started forward in her chair with an exclamation.

"What is it? What is it?" asked old Mr. Bayre, testily.

At the sound of his voice Miss Merriman began to tremble so violently that Bayre thought she would have fallen. The next moment the old man turned round, with a frown, and faced the intruders.

Miss Merriman uttered an exclamation, started forward, stared intently into the face of the old man, who shrank and quailed before her. Then, with a loud shriek, she fell back, fainting and white, into the young man's supporting arms

CHAPTER XXV

THE HIDDEN WOMAN

OLWEN had started to her feet in amazement and perplexity. Bayre led the fainting lady to a sofa and made her sit down. Both were too much occupied with her to pay much attention to old Mr. Bayre, who, on meeting the visitor's eyes and hearing her scream, had promptly relapsed into his former huddled-up condition in the armchair.

Olwen went down on her knees beside Miss Merriman, took off her traveling cloak and loosened her dress. Bayre, looking round for something that might prove helpful in the emergency, saw a bottle of strong smelling-salts on the dressing-table at the far end of the room, and bringing it back with him, gave it to Olwen.

"It's all right," cried the girl, "she'll be herself in a minute. Fetch a little water."

Bayre looked round him once more, and an exclamation broke from his lips. The armchair in front of the fire, in which his uncle had sat huddled up, was empty.

Olwen looked round too and noted this fact, and her eyes met those of the young man.

"What is it? What does it mean?"

"Hush! she'll be able to tell us in a minute. There's something very strange under all this," said he.

They could hear the noise of someone moving about in the small adjoining room where old Mr. Bayre kept some of the most valuable of his curiosities, and they guessed that the old man himself was there, within hearing. So they said nothing more for a few minutes, until, indeed, the color began to return to Miss Merriman's face and she sat upright. Then she brushed them aside and looked towards the armchair.

"Where has she gone?" asked she in a hoarse voice.

Olwen and Bayre looked at each other, the girl growing suddenly paler, the young man too much mystified to speak.

"Where is she?" repeated Miss Merriman in a whisper.

"She!" stammered Olwen.

The visitor nodded.

"Do you mean my uncle?" said Bayre, in impressive, deliberate tones, thinking that the shock of the meeting had affected her to the point of making her hysterical.

But Miss Merriman sprang to her feet, and searching every corner of the room with her eyes, said, in a low voice indeed, but quite distinctly, quite sanely,—

"No, I don't mean your uncle. I mean your uncle's cousin—Miss Ford."

Olwen started to her feet.

"I thought you were going to say that," she said.

"What?"

She turned to him with excitement. Miss Merriman seemed still too much agitated to be talked to.

"Yes. The idea only came into my head a moment ago. I think I understand now the mystery of the woman hidden in the house."

Bayre could not yet understand.

"What is all this about a woman?" said he. "I see no woman, I see no Miss Ford. Can't you speak more plainly?"

Before she could answer they were all startled by a mocking, harsh laugh, and turning towards the spot whence it came, they saw, standing in the doorway between the bedroom and the small apartment adjoining, a quaint, weird figure. While the short, sparse grey hair, the hatchet face, pale, lined and wrinkled, were those of the old man they had seen huddled up in the arm-chair a few moments previously, the rest of the figure, now clad in a woman's bodice and skirt of rusty black alpaca, drove home to them all with startling distinctness the fact of the fraud which had been played upon them.

"Miss Ford! It's Miss Ford!" cried Miss Merriman, almost in a scream. "Where is my husband?"

"He's been dead for a good many months now," was the cool reply of the queer figure in rusty black, in the same hard, masculine tones

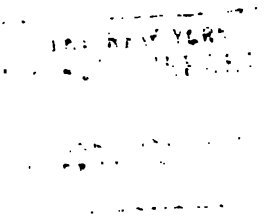
which had so effectually helped her in her long imposture. "You've been a widow, my dear, ever since the early summer, ever since the night when *I*, his cousin and your devoted friend, was supposed to die."

The cynical effrontery with which the old woman thus confessed the imposture she had practised had such an effect upon them all that it was some moments before they could speak. Miss Ford, meanwhile, with her faded eyes, her cadaverous hatchet face, and her attitude of callous defiance, was the only self-possessed person in the room

"Ha! ha!" laughed she again. "To think what a pack of fools you all were, to be outwitted so easily by an old woman! Why, it's only a chance that has found me out now; neither you," and she looked scornfully at Bayre, "nor you," and she looked still more scornfully at Olwen, "would have found me out but for this accident of Mrs. Bayre's turning up! Well, it doesn't matter now; I've played out the game. I made up my mind I'd never be turned out of the *château* while I lived, and I've kept my word, in spite of my cousin's intentions, in spite of everything and everybody."

It was a shocking and pitiable spectacle, that of the fierce old woman struggling between her determined will and her physical weakness. For even as she finished speaking, her voice broke and she staggered rather than walked back to the old armchair which she had quitted in male attire a quarter of an hour before.

WHAT A PACK OF FOOLS YOU ALL WERE!



A glimmering of the truth as to the reason of this most singular fraud had by this time reached the minds of two out of the three persons present. Mistress of Creux Miss Ford had been during her cousin's bachelorhood; mistress she had continued to be, at some cost of personal cruelty, during the unhappy reign of her cousin's young wife; mistress she had contrived to be through gross imposture, up to the end. For that the end was not very far off for her was clearly apparent to those who looked at the ash-colored face and the sunken eyes, and who heard the broken voice and labored breathing of the indomitable woman.

"Blaise knew you then!" cried young Bayre, suddenly. "That's what he must have found out when he came here with me!"

Miss Ford smiled feebly.

"Well, I believe he did find me out on the day he came here with you," she admitted. "Recognized me, I fancy, by the mark I have here on my forehead." And she indicated with one of her lean fingers a mole that grew almost under the hair over her right temple. "I could pass well enough for my cousin with my cap on; but in a room it's more difficult. Still, it didn't much matter, for Monsieur Blaise didn't dare to 'give me away.' "

"And the Vazons knew you, of course?"

"Yes, the rogues! They knew it and made me pay for it. But after all, in spite of their threats, what good have they done themselves by their knowledge? I've no doubt they have tried

to make capital out of the truth over in Guernsey; but who'd believe it?"

Bayre was amazed, almost to the point of admiration, at the old woman's audacious cunning. As she said, the story was too inconceivable to be readily believed, especially after this lapse of time. She took a pride in her deception, and the silence which followed her speech was presently broken by herself with a quiet chuckle of pride at her own cleverness.

"Yes," she said, nodding her head two or three times towards the fire, at which she was warming her thin yellow hands, "there was no fear of my being discovered by anybody about here when they had once got used to the sight of poor old Monsieur Bayre, so broken down with grief at the loss of his cousin and of his beautiful young wife"—and she looked round to throw a vixenish glance at Miss Merriman, who was sitting in a state of stupefaction beside Olwen on the sofa—"that he seemed 'quite a different man!' Ha, ha, ha!"

Bayre remembered his first impressions of the shambling figure which he had taken for that of his uncle, and he realized the improbability that anyone should descry feminine attributes in that creature with the large masculine features, the masculine walk, with the pipe between its teeth and the peaked cap drawn over its eyes.

The silence was broken by Olwen, who suddenly cried,—

"Then the woman shut up here, hidden away,

the woman whose knitting needles I used to hear, was—"

"Eliza Ford," croaked the impostor with grim enjoyment. "I couldn't give up my knitting, and I was not above certain little feminine vanities." She suddenly burst into another grim laugh, and turning round to Olwen, said, "You saw something one day, didn't you? You saw a hand covered with rings at the window of the old powdering-room. Well, that was mine. I used to vary the monotony of being a shabby old man by hunting about in the old wardrobes and decking myself out in what I found there and in the jewel-cases! Strange freak at my time of life, eh?"

And she suddenly turned upon them with an air and tone so masculine that Bayre found himself shivering at the uncanny sight and sound.

"And you, young sir," she went on, turning to him, "you remember the surprise visit you paid me one night, and the pleasant promenade we had through the rooms?"

"I remember," said Bayre, with a strange feeling of sickness from the shock and the memories combined.

"And I'm sure you can't have forgotten how we came to a room, the old powdering-room it was, where feminine finery lay strewn about in all directions, and where you found that one of the dresses was warm, as if it had just been taken off?"

Bayre nodded.

"Well, *I* had just taken it off, I, Eliza Ford;

and it was I who had been amusing myself with all the trumpery you saw about—high-heeled shoes, fans, false hair, and the rest. Oh! it was a splendid farce to watch your face, and to linger and speak loud, and try to trick you into thinking that there was some young beauty in hiding about the place! Oh, I enjoyed the fun amazingly!"

"You didn't show yourself very grateful," said Bayre, dryly, "to judge by the act Miss Eden surprised you in!"

The old woman grew suddenly grave, and from mocking her tone grew malicious.

"Grateful? No. I hated you. I would have killed you if I could," she said spitefully.

"But why?" asked he, astonished at what looked like the outburst of a malignant old witch.

But to this question she made no answer. And yet, after all, the aversion she had shown him was the most surprising part of the whole matter.

He tried another question.

"What was it I saw you hunting for that day in the great hall," asked he, "when you appeared to be tearing up the boards of the floor?"

Her face grew sombre again.

"Oh," said she, after a pause, "I was looking for something, something that had been hidden from me, something I wanted to find."

A light came into Bayre's mind.

"Was it your cousin's will?" asked he, sharply.

By the convulsive movement which passed

through her he knew that he had made a good guess.

"If so," he went on very quietly, "you didn't succeed in finding it, I know."

Into the wicked old leathern face there came a look of malicious anxiety, and Bayre began to understand things more clearly.

"I suppose," said he, "that my uncle made a will which did not please you, and that he would not let you know where he kept it, and that it was because you knew its provisions that you determined to carry out this fraud. You were alone with him when he died—"

"Do you mean to insinuate?—" she began fiercely.

"No, of course not. I only insinuate that you took advantage of his sudden death, and of the fact that communication with Guernsey was cut off at that time, to work this deceit. The story runs that Miss Ford's body in its coffin was carried away at the upsetting of the boat which was to take it across to Guernsey. Is it of any use to ask you the truth underlying that fiction?"

"Your uncle lies buried in the wood outside the *château*," said Miss Ford, simply. "I did all the work myself; the Vazons may know where he lies, but nobody else does. I cut a cross in the bark of a beech tree near the head of the grave."

Cunning as the woman was, adept at deceit as she was, Bayre saw no reason to doubt the truth of this account, which he indeed subsequently verified. There remained the matter of the will.

"I suppose," he said, "that if my uncle had left the *château* to you for life you would never have done this extraordinary thing?"

She shot at him a suspicious look.

"We need not discuss that," she said. "I *have* enjoyed the *château* for my life, and it will belong to his son when he is of age. The matter, after all, does not interest you."

"Supposing," suggested Bayre, "that I had been mentioned in the will? Supposing I had been appointed guardian of the child and custodian of my uncle's collection?"

The old face looked livid in the shadow.

"We needn't waste time supposing things," she said presently. "The will has been destroyed."

"Ah!" said Bayre.

"Not by me," retorted the old woman, quickly. "What I should have done with it if I had found it doesn't concern you or anybody now. As a matter of fact, it was hidden away by old Bartlett Bayre in a garret among some lumber, and was enclosed in an iron box. The Vazons stole the box with other things, and it was found broken open in their cottage by Jean, who found also the ashes of the papers that had been locked inside."

"Not all of them, I think," said Bayre, in a low voice.

He was beginning to feel rather afraid of the effect which the discovery of the will in his possession might have upon the old woman. Wicked, grasping, malicious and deceitful as she was, he was not anxious for the occurrence of another tragedy before his eyes.

But his words were enough to wake all her suspicions. Half-rising in her chair, leaning on the arm of it, she hissed out at him,—

"Let me see it! Let me see it!"

"Not now," said he, gently but firmly; "you shall see it another time, in the presence of your solicitors and mine."

One more doubt she had to satisfy, and only one.

"What was the date of it?" she asked sharply.

"April the 30th of last year," answered he at once.

She asked no more questions; but was satisfied. Passing one thin hand restlessly over her face she sank back almost lifeless in her chair.

CHAPTER XXVI

THE RULE OF THREE BECOMES THE RULE OF ONE

It was plain to them all before the day was over that the discoveries of the morning had hastened the end of the impostor who had passed so long as old Bartlett Bayre.

She would not suffer Bayre himself to come again into her presence, nor would she allow the name of her cousin's widow to be mentioned before her. Arbitrary and eccentric to the last, she made a favor of permitting Olwen to wait upon her, and when, on the following morning before daylight, she passed quietly away, only Olwen and Madame Portelet were in the room.

Nobody could help feeling that her death was the best way, for herself as well as for others, out of the difficult position in which she had placed herself; and when the doctor and the lawyer, who were summoned from Guernsey, not in time to see her in life but in time to learn the extraordinary story while she lay dead in the great dark room, met Bartlett Bayre and the two ladies in one of the *salons* downstairs, there was much discussion as to the best way of making known the truth to the world.

For it could not be kept hidden. Already, as they knew, there were rumors abroad in Guernsey, spread by the Vazons; and now the burial of Miss Ford and the re-burial of old Bartlett Bayre would of necessity set folk talking.

It was arranged that these gentlemen should take upon themselves the responsibility of giving the whole truth of the strange tale to the little world of the islands. And they could only hope, for the sake of the family credit, that it would not get into the English newspapers.

When the will came to be read it was found, as Bayre already partly knew, that the estate and collection of old Bartlett Bayre had been left to his son, who was to remain during his minority in the guardianshp of his first cousin, Bartlett Bayre, junior.

In his care also the precious collection was left, and it was expressly stated that Miss Ford (of whose indifference to his collection the old man complained) should leave the *château* and retire to a house belonging to her cousin in Guernsey.

There was no mention whatever of his young wife in the will of the old gentleman; he had treated her as if she did not exist.

It was not until after the reading of the will, when the lawyer and the doctor had gone back to Guernsey, that Bayre, for the first time, found himself alone with Olwen. Mrs. Bartlett Bayre, in a very subdued and tearful condition, had stolen out of the house by herself on the first opportunity.

Then for the first time Olwen grew absurdly shy and began to talk about the weather.

"Oh, we can leave the weather alone for a little while," said Bayre, coolly. "We have other things to discuss—novels for one thing."

She grew very red.

"Oh, I was so sorry afterwards that I troubled you with my nonsense," she said with an assumption of indifference. "You can send it back to me; I'll give you the stamps; or—no, you can put it into your waste-paper basket —or—"

"Thank you—so much," said he, "for both those suggestions. You may give me the stamps if you like; I never refuse postage stamps. But it would be a pity to put your manuscript into the waste-paper basket, for I heard on Friday night that it had been accepted by a publisher, who, by-the-bye, has rejected everything he's seen of mine."

The girl was transfixed with delight.

"Ac—cepted," faltered she, "really and truly accepted! Do you mean that they're going to *print* it?"

"Print it, bind it, and put your name on the back in gilt letters," replied he. "More than that, they're going to pay you for it."

Olwen clasped her hands; she almost staggered with delight.

"Oh, no! oh, no!" she whispered ecstatically; "it's too much, it's too much!"

"Well, I don't know about being too much," said Bayre, reflectively. "I shouldn't like to write

many novels on the same terms if I had nothing else to live by. Of course, they say it's immature and crude, and the work of a beginner; those are the excuses they make for offering you only ten pounds for it. But poor as the pay is, I should advise you to take it; it's a beginning, you know."

"Take it!" cried Olwen, incredulously. "You think it necessary to advise me to take it? Why, why, it's magnificent, colossal! Didn't Milton only get five pounds for *Paradise Lost.*"

"Ah, but that was poetry, and Milton was different," said Bayre.

She laughed joyously.

"Oh, Mr. Bayre, I can never thank you enough. You've given me more happiness than anybody else has ever done in all my life."

He made a rush for the opportunity, but before he could more than open his lips she checked him by an abrupt turn in the conversation.

"Isn't it dreadful about poor Mrs. Bayre? That she should be left without a penny?"

"Well, she ran away, you know."

"Well, but he did everything to prove that he wanted her to. I've heard a great deal about it, and I know that life was made unendurable to her here. It seems a dreadful thing that he should have died without forgiving her, or making any provision for her."

"Well, as a matter of fact, he probably knew that where her boy was she would be, and that the same hands that cared for the boy would care for her."

"Oh, yes, yours," said Olwen, with sudden coldness.

"Yes, mine," acquiesced Bayre, buoyantly. "When he's treated me so handsomely, and placed such confidence in me whom he could only remember as a boy, the least I can do is to carry out what I'm sure were his wishes."

"Oh, yes, of course. You will have to live here, will you not?"

"I'm not bound to, but that seems to have been my uncle's wish. He has left money to be devoted to the upkeep of the place until the time his son comes of age, and that fund is to be administered by me. And besides that, as you heard, he's left me ten thousand pounds."

"You'll be quite rich. You'll marry her, of course?"

"That would be the simplest way of settling things, if it could be managed, wouldn't it?" said Bayre, demurely.

"Certainly. It would be a perfectly charming arrangement. I congratulate you already."

Her manner was very haughty, and flighty, and cool.

"You'd better wait till she's accepted me, or at least till I've proposed, hadn't you? It's dangerous to congratulate too soon. Supposing it were to come to nothing, you know, I should feel so foolish, after receiving your congratulations."

"Oh, but it sha'n't come to nothing. I'll speak to her for you myself."

"You dare!" said Bayre, simply.

And Olwen began to laugh under her breath. He caught her by the wrist.

"Are you going to wait, Olwen, till you come across a fellow like the hero of your book?" asked he, in the driest of dry tones.

She bit her lip, and looking down, struggled to get away.

"Oh, I don't know," said she, quickly; "men outside books are never like those inside them. It's useless to expect it."

"I think so too. Better give up all hope of meeting a paper-and-print hero, and settle down with a harmless, commonplace ten-thousand-pounder, who can turn his back upon the jerry-built flat and the villa one-brick-thick."

"Why, it is a romance, a real romance!" murmured the girl, softly, when he had kissed her for the second time.

"But it isn't all your own, remember. I had a hand in this too. It takes one for the romance of the pen, but two for the romance of a kiss."

And they laughed softly over the little joke, and laughing still, reached the avenue of the shut-up house.

Little as they loved or respected the memory of Miss Ford, they felt bound to remain in the island until the double interment had taken place at Guernsey of that lady and of old Mr. Bayre, whose rude coffin was unearthed and transported with that of his cousin to the larger island, where the strange events of the past few months had caused such a buzz of scandal that the three young people were very glad when the sombre

ceremony was over and they could get away to London.

It was on the Wednesday that they arrived in town, and Olwen accompanied Mrs. Bayre to her rooms, where she was to stay with her and the famous baby for the present.

It was arranged before they left Bayre that the two ladies should honor the Diggings with their presence on the following afternoon, and that they should bring the heir of Creux with them.

The Diggings, therefore, on the day of the festivity, were a glorious sight. Cut flowers were not enough. Palms and ferns and other plants were bought, their pots were decorated with silk handkerchiefs of artistic colorings, and they were arranged about the room in every available space, until there was not a corner anywhere that you could find room to place so much as a book or a plate upon.

Although it was a mild day, the fire was made to roar up the chimney, with the well-meaning belief that ladies and children were hothouse flowers, who throve best in excessive warmth.

Tarts, cakes, sweets and delicacies of all kinds were ordered in such abundance (the young men considered it mean to order less than a dozen of any one thing) that Mrs. Inkersole grew quite pathetic, and warned them that in a week of living on nothing but pastry they would never be able to eat it all up.

To suit the Gargantuan appetities they supposed the ladies to possess, tea was ordered, and milk

and coffee, on the same magnificent scale, so that the preparations resembled rather those for a glorified school treat than the entertainment of two ladies and a child whose age was still reckoned in months.

But none of the three saw anything absurd or unnecessary in all this, but rather troubled their heads lest something should have been forgotten than asked whether they had provided too much.

Jan Repton's bedroom-studio was transformed into a bower of strongly-perfumed hothouse flowers for the ladies to take off their hats in, although even Susan reminded them that ladies kep' their 'ats on to tea.

They silenced her with scorn, and went their own way unheeding.

And when at last, with a modest ring, the two ladies and the baby arrived and ascended the stairs with soft tread, and were ushered into the presence of the three hosts, one would have thought that they were three smug young curates or mild-mannered Y.M.C.A.'s, so trim and still and subdued were they after all the fuss and the fluster, the fuming and the shouting, the running about and the hiding away that had been going on for hours before.

The ladies, too, were very quiet and rather shy, and Mrs. Bayre, in particular, kept her eyes fixed upon her little boy with maternal pride, which struck Southerley as being rather forced.

When the door and a window had been opened to cool the appalling atmosphere, however, and

they had all sat down to tea, not in the orthodox fashion in twos and threes about the room, but, upon Bayre's advice, to an honest round table, they presently began to lose a little of the stiffness which had characterized the proceedings at the outset, and at last Jan Repton, suddenly plunging, as men do, from acute shyness to confidence even more acute, turned to Mrs. Bayre and said,—

"Look here, Mrs. Bayre, I don't think it's fair that I should be left out of the general post. If Miss Eden takes Bayre, and Southerley takes you, *I* must have the baby!"

For one moment the consternation which followed this audacious and awful speech was too deep for words. For, be it noted that Southerley and Mrs. Bayre had conducted themselves from the outset as strangers of the deepest dye, and no one ignorant of recent events would have thought it possible that there was any feeling in either of them of a sentimental nature towards the other.

These terrible words, however, caused them to look up, to catch each other's eye, to look down, to laugh feebly, to "give themselves away" in a manner which would have tortured a person of finer feelings than Repton.

The artist, however, was conscious only of a pause, a ghastly silence, and he went on, with the utmost cheerfulness,—

"Come, Bayre, come, Southerley, that's fair, isn't it?"

For one moment Southerley's fresh-colored

face showed symptoms of apoplexy. The next, an inspiration seized him.

"Mrs.—er—Bayre," he said solemnly, "let us discuss the proposition of this frivolous person."

And with that he rose, and with courage which he had never shown before, and which he was never in his life to show again, he deliberately left his chair at the other side of the table and took one next to her. And she laughed prettily and fell in with his humor, and affected to turn her back upon Repton and to devote herself to serious discussion with him.

And that the discussion really did become serious may be supposed, for during the rest of the evening these two were never very far apart.

Presently a sense of something having happened stole over the assembly, and Repton found himself, with brilliant indiscretion, discussing the secretly-arrived-at situation with the same outspokenness as before.

"It now becomes a serious question," he urged plaintively, "who is to educate that child. We were three of us, and we managed as well as could be expected. But now that there are five, the matter must be reconsidered. Who is to have the charge of the heir of Creux?"

"I am," said Mrs. Bayre, lifting her chubby boy and pressing his round cheek against hers.

"And I," murmured Southerley, in a deep-voiced growl, "shall have the charge of you."

"It's a great pity," said Repton, whose devotion

to the child was as strong as it was new; "I'd have made an artist of him!"

"But the question is, you know," said Bayre, "what he would have made of you."

And then they all laughed; it took very little to set them laughing on that happy evening. And so the problem of the rule of three was solved in the easiest possible manner, and perhaps Jan Repton was not the least happy of the group.

"After all, there's one's art!" he remarked to the ladies, as he showed them, with pride, one of his paintings. It was on a most beautiful easel, one they could admire with a free conscience. But the picture itself was one of the worst you ever saw!